

2013 Asian American Studies Survey: What is Asian America?





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2013 Asian American Studies Survey:

What is Asian America?

By the numbers, **374** survey respondents.

- 54 seniors
- 74 juniors
- 115 sophomores
- 131 freshmen
- 262 females
- 109 male
- 3 other



Introduction

The alphabet soup of Asian student group acronyms on Princeton campus – CSA, KASA, TASA, SASA, VSA, JSA – represents the cultural diversity of the Princeton Asian American community. The Asian American Students Association (AASA) is unique in working to promote awareness of both campus-specific and national issues that impact the Asian American community at Princeton and in the US.

However, questions about our advocacy efforts often arise, specifically regarding the term “Asian American.” Many consider “Asian American” to be a nebulous demographic term that subsumes a vast variety of different ethnic groups. Indeed, the concept of “Asian American” is a complicated social construct. The term emerged in the 1960s with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, and was used to bridge differences within the heterogeneous Asian American community in order to build political power. Yet at the same time, the term has been used as a way to erase differences between individuals, and to discriminate against Asian Americans as a category. The nuances and complications of the construct of Asian America are the subject of this survey: what exactly *is* Asian America?

AASA recently released an Asian American demographics survey to answer that question. Sent to University undergraduates via email this past fall, the survey asked participants six questions. The first five solicited perspectives on the cohesion of the Asian American community. The last question asked respondents to define what ethnic groups they thought to be Asian American. These questions were written with the purpose of determining what perceptions and misconceptions of the Asian American community are prevalent today.

The survey received 374 responses with 54 seniors, 74 juniors, 115 sophomores, and 131 freshmen participating. Our results demonstrate that students possess a wide range of conceptions about what Asian America constitutes, as well as clear misunderstandings about Asian America. The survey accordingly demonstrates that Asian America is still unfamiliar to most, and that the limitations of the term itself must not be ignored.

Asian American Defined by Areas of Origin

It seems appropriate to start with the most concrete way to define Asian America – based on ethnic heritage. Princeton students agreed almost unanimously that Americans with ancestors from East and Southeast Asia are Asian American. However, a notably smaller 62.6 percent of participants believed that Americans of South Asian descent were Asian American. Only 42.5 percent of participants considered those with Pacific Island origins to be Asian American, and 37.7 percent of participants considered those with origins in Central Asia to be Asian American. Lastly, only 21.1 percent and 11.5 percent of participants believed that people with ancestors from North Asia and the Middle East, respectfully, to be Asian American. (Please see Figure 1 for the bar graph depiction of these numbers.)

Participants were also given the opportunity to provide their own comments and reflections. The range of comments we received appropriately reflect the complexity of opinions surrounding the term “Asian American.”

Some commented on the problems and constraints of “Asian American” as a category:

“I think that this exercise fruitfully illustrates the constraints of national identifications in cultural analysis. Put differently, this raises the question, why is the first sub-category of Asian-American some kind of national affiliation? Perhaps referents to nationality no longer provide helpful ways to think about Asian American identity. I think this is especially the case when considering diasporic communities in the US.”

“What is silly about the concept of race is that people end up associating large and very different cultural and ethnic groups together based solely on geographical locations.”

“This is just a problem of categorization: why such a large area is only considered one continent, yet Europe (whose people designated the continental divisions) is such a small distinct zone. I think the East Asian heritage is very different from those of North Asia and regions further to the West, and so Asian-American is more easily identifiable with those cultures. Perhaps there should be more distinction. (EA,SEA)”

“I think it is problematic to lump people into massive ethnic groups (e.g. I think the blanket terms Hispanic and White cause more stereotyping and disregard for unique cultural practices or histories than more specific terms). That's why my ‘Asia’ is very small.”

“I don't think there really should be any category called “Asian American” because there are far fewer commonalities between Asians of different ethnicities than there are differences.”

Others held that categorizations should not be forced but rather chosen by each individual:

“...It seems to me that this classification should be one that is personal. If someone identifies as an Asian American for some reason, then others should view him/her as such. If not, then people should generally withhold their innate tendency to classify. These classifications are for the most part arbitrary and only have the potential to cause unnecessary feelings of discomfort in those who are the target of classification.”

“I wouldn't force a label upon anyone else -- if someone of Russian ancestry wants to consider themselves Asian American, that's their prerogative...”

Yet others believed that “Asian” could be applied to everyone with ancestors in Asia, even though it usually is not:

“There is a certain point along Russia where the inhabitants probably consider themselves more European. Otherwise to me at least, Asian is a vague category and groups within the Asian continent should be determined by country/ethnic group and the term Asian should belong to everyone in Asia (not just those in East Asia as is typically used)”

“Technically all are Asian American. But typically in conversation Asian American would not refer to all these people. Those from the Middle East for example do not tend to be referred to as Asian but rather as Arab or Middle Eastern.”

“Asian American obviously implies Americans with an Asian (the entire continent) background but most people only mean East Asia when they speak of Asian Americans.”

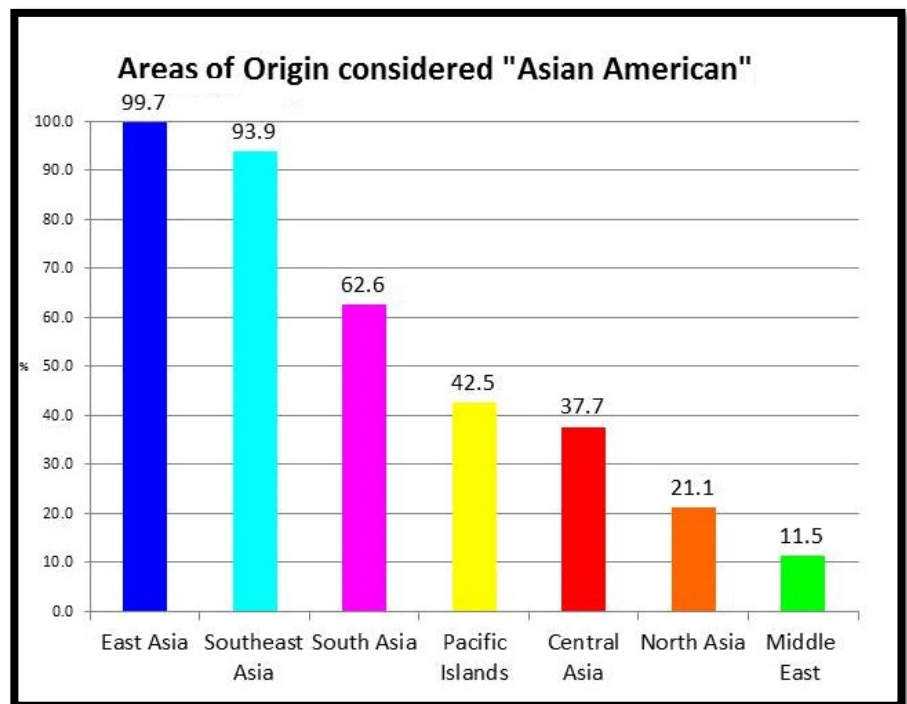


Figure 1: Regions of Asia against percentage of respondents who considered people with ancestry from a given region to be Asian American. Above map was used to discern what region was considered to be “East Asia” or “South Asia”, for example.

Similarities and Differences Among Asian Americans

The bulk of our survey examined a different question than who is Asian American, however. Rather, the question we examined was: just how similar are Asian Americans? To do this, we selected five features that we think are often used to unify groups of people:

culture, race, history, economics, and politics. We then asked respondents to rank the similarity of Asian Americans in these five categories on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 denoting “very different.” Phrasing was standardized for all five questions with only the adjective relating to the feature changed; the phrasing was taken from Lien, Conway, and Wong’s “The Contours and Sources of Ethnic Identity Choices Among Asian Americans” (2003).¹ The survey form we used, along with all of the questions, can be found in Appendix A at the end of this report.

The results generally seemed to support a theory that Princeton students do not consider Asian Americans to be very similar. Responses with regard to historical and economic similarities were mound-shaped and skewed to the right, indicating a strong consensus that Asian Americans are not similar in either of these regards. Participants seemed to conclude that Asian Americans are more similar racially, culturally, or politically. Graphs of the responses to those three questions were mound-shaped towards the center, showing participants to generally consider Asian Americans to be neither distinct nor similar in these three areas.

Of course, responses to all of these questions are subjective to a certain extent. The inability for us to quantify racial, cultural, or historical similarity in any meaningful capacity makes it especially hard to put those three graphs in perspective against an objective measure. We show some information that we think comes close to quantifying those three qualities in Figure 2 below. More specifically, we believe it is important to consider the recent demographic changes that have occurred within the Asian American community when considering Asian Americans’ racial, cultural, and historical similarities. The Asian American community has grown dramatically since the lifting of immigration quotas in 1965. While there are still six ethnic groups that are still by far the largest in the Asian American community, the percentage of the overall community that is comprised of immigrants has risen dramatically. Once again, however, how these demographic changes can be said to impact Asian Americans’ cohesion is to a certain extent a subjective judgment.

Similarities in a political or economic sense are easier to quantify, however. Party affiliation and exit polling can help us to determine political similarities among Asian Americans. While we do not have access to a Gini coefficient or an equivalent specific to Asian Americans, we can examine such statistics as average household income and the unemployment rate of various ethnic groups to determine economic similarities.

Comparing our results with the statistics outlined above, it would seem that Princeton students are becoming better informed about the economic status of Asian Americans. Despite the prevalence of the “model minority” stereotype that characterizes all Asian Americans as high achieving – a fact only perpetuated by Asian Americans having the highest annual household income of any racial group – there are still ethnic communities that are stricken by severe poverty. Notably, Southeast Asian groups that came to the US

¹ Lien, P.-t., Margaret Conway, M. and Wong, J. “The Contours and Sources of Ethnic Identity Choices Among Asian Americans.” *Social Science Quarterly*, 84: 461–481. 2003. doi: 10.1111/1540-6237.8402015

largely as refugees, such as the Hmong and Lao, have disproportionately high rates of unemployment. Traditionally, there have been concerns that the “model minority” stereotype has led to these groups being overlooked by aid organizations that generally see the Asian American community as not needing help. But our results, by demonstrating a clear consensus that Asian Americans are not similar economically, seem to show a shift away from this stereotype, at least on Princeton’s campus.

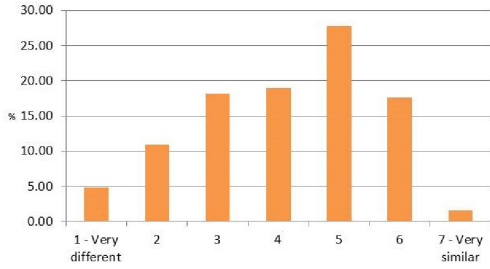
By contrast, Princeton students still seem to be rather uninformed about Asian Americans’ political leanings. The most common answer that respondents put for Asian American political similarities is 4, which could represent how most participants felt they did not know enough about the community to make a firm “similar” or “dissimilar” decision. Still, the Asian American community is rather homogenous in its political behavior. A large number of Asian Americans are still not registered with either party, but those undecided voters tend largely to vote Democratic, along with the 50% of Asian Americans who are registered as Democrats. In the early 2000s, it was largely true that all Asian American ethnic groups voted Democratic with the exception of Vietnamese Americans. But even Vietnamese Americans have begun to shift politically; a majority of Vietnamese Americans voted for Obama in 2012.² We feel that it is reasonable to say that Asian Americans are decisively similar politically from this information, thus implying a lack of awareness in the greater university community.

We consequently believe that while great progress has been made in educating the university community about the Asian America and its issues, there is much more progress to be made. Especially regarding awareness of Asian Americans as a political bloc, great strides can be made through events and speakers on campus. It is harder to say, especially with regard to culture or history, whether or not greater awareness ought to be promoted on campus. We still feel safe in saying, however, that the increase in Asian American history classes, considering this subfield is overlooked much too frequently in standard curricula, would be beneficial towards educating Princetonians about the dynamic experience that Asians experienced in America even before the new waves of immigration post-1965.

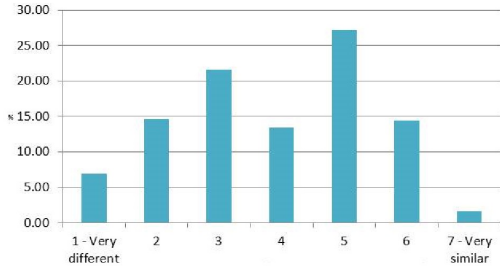
² The Asian American Justice Center, Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote, National Asian American Survey. *Behind the Numbers: Post-Election Survey of Asian American and Pacific Islander Voters in 2012*. April, 2013, 6.

Princeton's Opinions

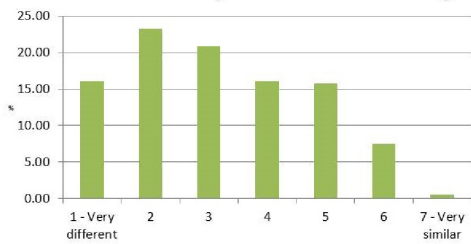
Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common racially; others disagree.



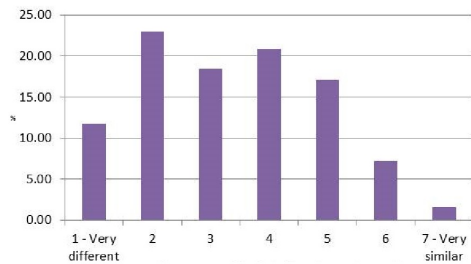
Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common culturally; others disagree.



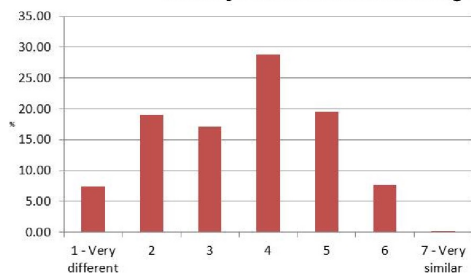
Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common historically; others disagree.



Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common economically; others disagree.



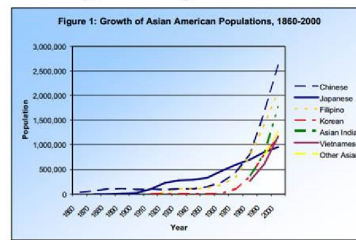
Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common politically; others disagree.



Trends in America

U.S. Asian groups	Population	% of Asians
Chinese	4,010,114	23.2
Filipino	3,416,840	19.7
Indian	3,183,063	18.4
Vietnamese	1,737,433	10.0
Korean	1,706,822	9.9
Japanese	1,304,286	7.5

74%
OF ASIAN-AMERICAN
ADULTS 18+ ARE FOREIGN
BORN (OUTSIDE THE U.S.).



Household Income, 2010

Category	Median
U.S. population	\$49,600
U.S. Asians	\$66,000
U.S. Asian groups	
Indian	\$88,000
Filipino	\$75,000
Japanese	\$65,390
Chinese	\$65,050
Vietnamese	\$53,400
Korean	\$50,000

VS

Poverty Rates of
Hmong: 37.8%;
Cambodian: 29.3%;
Laotian: 18.5%;
Vietnamese: 16.6%

Political Affiliation

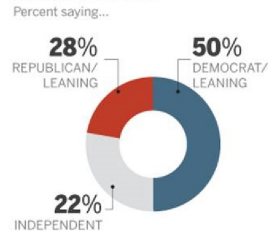


Figure 2: A summary of participants' responses regarding the cohesion of Asian Americans. Selected statistics and graphs (from the 2012 Pew Report on Asian America) are placed to the right to put participants' responses in perspective. The Pew Report materials were not shown to respondents.

An Analysis with Groupings

Using the data we obtained, we determined the following groups:

Group 1: East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Mixed race (part-Asian) – 154 respondents

Group 2: East Asian, Southeast Asian, Mixed race (part-Asian) – 139 respondents

Group 3: White (non-Hispanic), Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Mixed (non-Asian) – 171 respondents

Through the lens of these new groupings, we were able to consider the viewpoint of respondents defined as Asian American based on geography alone (Group 1), respondents defined as Asian American based on the majority consensus of our respondents (Group 2), and non-Asians (Group 3). The comparison of the three allowed us to analyze how race affects one's perception of Asian Americans as well as compare the viewpoints of Asian Americans as a whole with the group that many considered culturally and ethnically distinct, South Asians.

Overall, the results (shown in Figure 3 on page 8) revealed almost identical opinions between Group 1 and Group 2 with some variance from Group 3. Although the free responses suggested that the desire to differentiate South Asians from other Asians was rooted in a belief that ethnic differences between South Asians and East/Southeast Asians would cause ideological differences, shared opinions between Group 1 and 2 about similarities Asian American economic status, race, culture, history, and political leanings demonstrates that South Asians and Asians as a whole perceive Asian Americans the same way, even if they did not believe Asian Americans had much in common when it came to the issues themselves.

Turning our analysis to specific categories, we observed disagreements between Asians and non-Asians when it came to racial, cultural, historical, and political similarities. Opinions about Asian Americans' economic commonalities were generally consistent across all three groups; the left-leaning curve of all the groups indicated that the general population agreed Asian Americans have little in common economically. With regards to political similarities, Asians were more likely to believe Asian Americans shared political similarities than non-Asians; non-Asians were mostly neutral with results concentrating around 4 while the rightward-leaning curve for Asians suggested acknowledgement of some commonalities. Most interesting were the opinions on Asian American cultural similarities. While one might assume that Asian Americans, being more aware of at least their own Asian culture, would be more attuned to the differences between Asian cultures than a non-Asian participant. However, our survey suggests that Asians were *more* likely to believe Asian American have cultural commonalities than non-Asians, with results peaking at 5 and 3, respectively. A similar—though less extreme—pattern was noted in the perception of racial commonalities among Asian Americans, concentrated at 5 for the two Asian groupings and 4 for non-Asians.

We looked again at our results based on these groupings.

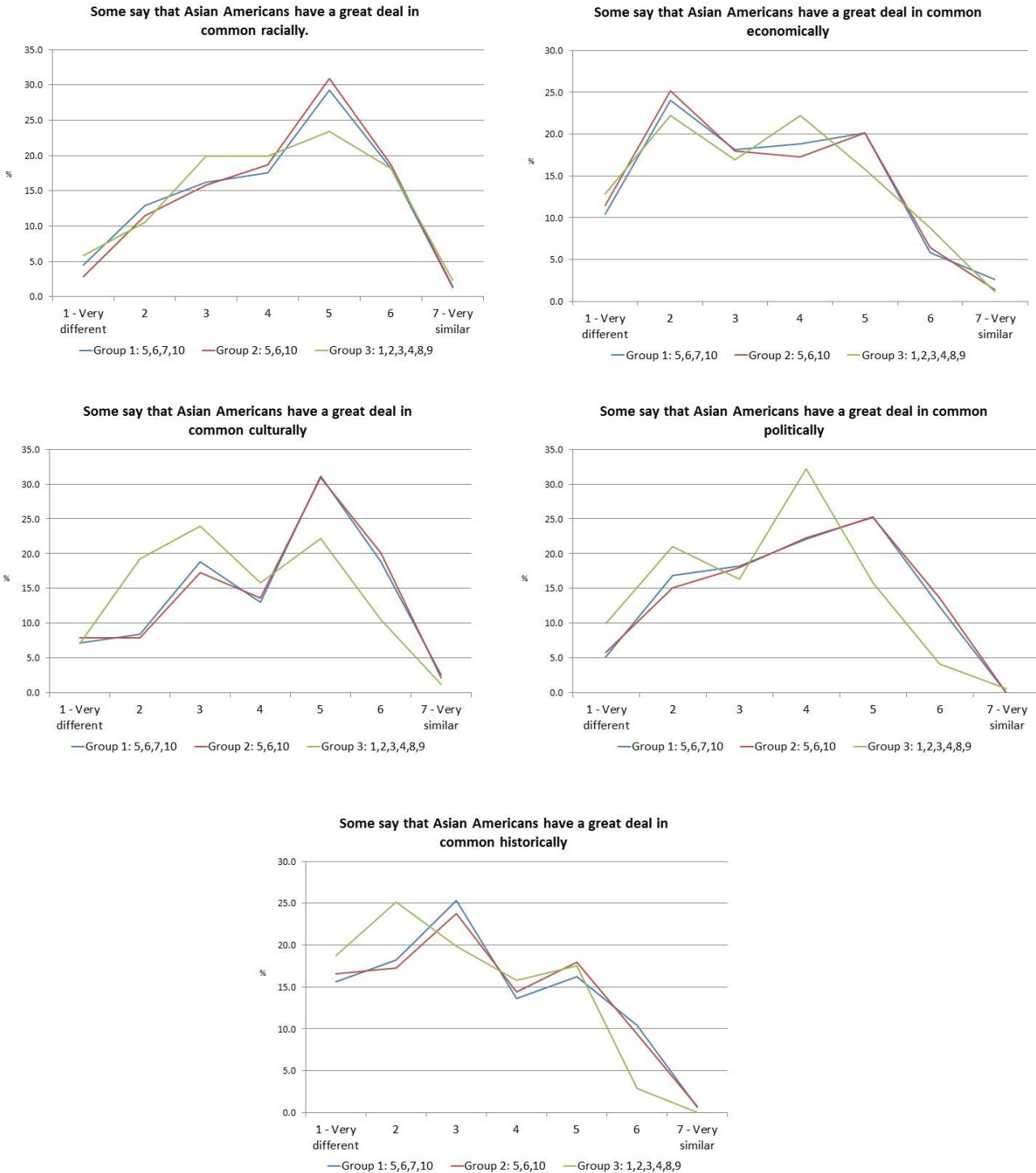


Figure 3: A comparative analysis of perceptions of Asian American cohesion according to respondents’ race. Green indicates participants not of Asian decent. Blue indicates participants of full or partial East Asian, Southeast Asian, or South Asian descent. Red indicates participants of full or partial East Asian or Southeast Asian descent alone.

This analysis suggests discrepancies between the ways Asian Americans perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by non-Asians. Given that non-Asians were more

likely to respond that Asian Americans were more different than similar, we can conclude that this discrepancy is not the result of misinformed stereotyping, but rather another phenomenon. While it could be possible that non-Asians are eager to hyperdifferentiate their Asian American peers, the results also imply Asian Americans misperceive themselves and undervalue their unique racial, economic, cultural, political, and historic characteristics.

Race vs. Ethnicity

While our survey was primarily focused on Asian Americans, the demographic questions at the beginning of the survey yielded fruitful results on the question of racial and ethnic identity in general. These two questions asked survey respondents to record their race and ethnicity. In order to elicit responses representative of respondents' personal perceptions of race and ethnicity, we did not provide definitions of those terms to participants but rather asked them to answer the two questions however they felt was appropriate.

The responses show a lack of consensus amongst Princeton students as to what "race," "ethnicity," and terms commonly used to categorize the two precisely entail (see Figure 4). This was clearest for respondents who identified as being of African heritage. Some said that their race was "black" and their ethnicity was "African American," while others reversed the two and said their ethnicity was "black" and their race was "African American." Yet others said their race and ethnicity were both "black" or both "African American." Those who identified as being of Asian heritage seemed to be more in agreement: most of these respondents said that their race was "Asian" and their ethnicity was "Indian," "Korean," etc. However, there were many who identified as "Asian" or "Chinese" in both race and ethnicity as well. Some people used terms such as "white" and "Caucasian" or "Latina/o" and "Hispanic" interchangeably, while four people answered the race question with "human."

This seems to be representative of a wider trend of confusion in society as to what race and ethnicity truly entail. Merriam-Webster states that the two terms are synonyms, while others differentiate race as a biological category and ethnicity as a cultural category. Yet others claim race itself is a social construct, and make a further distinction between ethnicity and nationality as a legal category. There is no consensus even in AASA as to how we should use this term either.

However, this is a question with broad implications beyond the issue of personal identity. Social programs are established on lines of racial and ethnic identification, as are political advocacy groups and, in some cases, even legal rights. It is encouraging to see that Princeton students are grappling with this important issue, and we hope that this is just the beginning of an active and productive dialogue on a question that has haunted this country and many others throughout history.

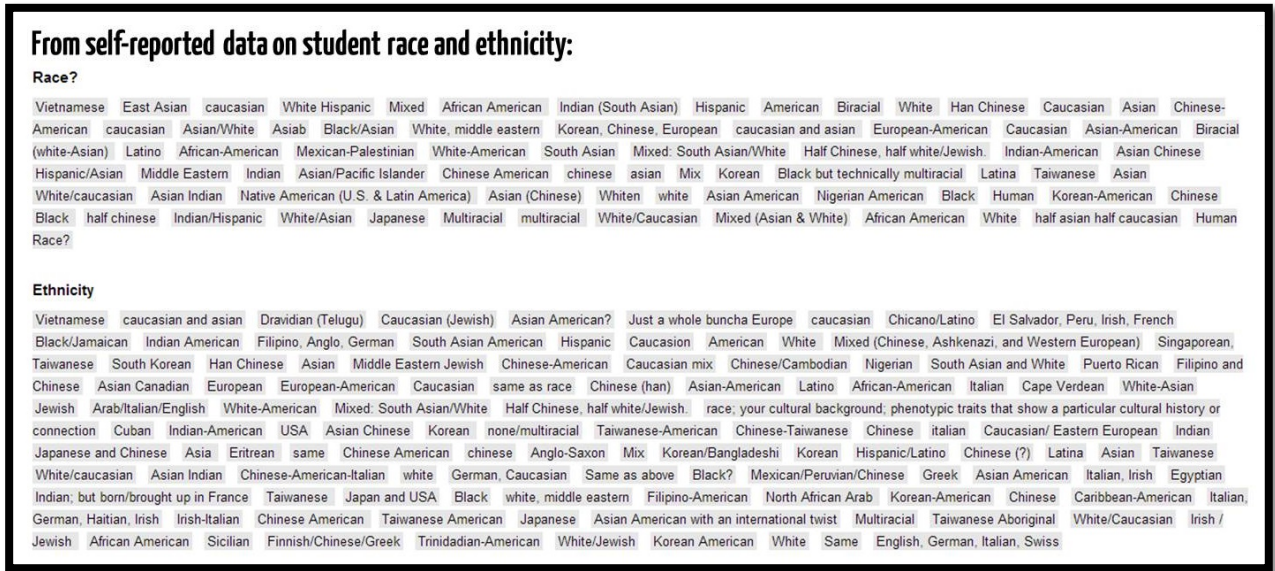


Figure 4: A listing of all responses by participants to two demographic questions at the beginning of the survey inquiring as to their race and ethnicity.

Conclusion

Race, ethnicity and culture can only loosely categorize individuals. Qualities such as geography, and phenotype are largely unsatisfactory and insufficient to describe a group of people. Yet, these ill-fitting classifications have defined American life in ways as formal as the U.S. Census and as informal as the unequal treatment of individuals in daily life.

When a reality of stereotyping and its tragic consequences are all too prevalent in American society, it pays to step back and really think about the ways in which we group individuals. If the categories do not fit, then neither do the stereotypes. And if the labels are not real, neither are these differences.

Appendix A: Survey Form

(Note: all times that radio buttons were used to select answer options, the options are indicated by bullet points. All free response questions end in a colon. Italics denote any further commentary not in the initial survey form.)

General Identification Questions

Name:

Net ID:

Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other

Class Year

- 2014
- 2015
- 2016
- 2017
- Graduate Student
- Faculty

Race?:

Ethnicity (Depending on how you interpret the word “ethnicity,” your answer can be the same as for “race.”):

Do you identify as an international student?

- Yes
- No

Survey Questions *(Respondents answered the following questions on a scale from 1 (very different) to 7 (very similar)).*

Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common racially; others disagree. Do you think that Asians in America are racially:

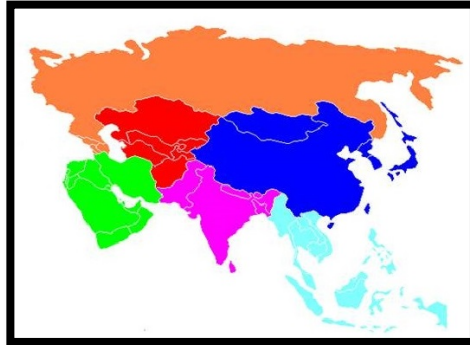
Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common culturally; others disagree. Do you think that Asians in America are culturally:

Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common economically; others disagree. Do you think that Asians in America are economically:

Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common politically; others disagree. Do you think that Asians in America are politically:

Some say that Asian Americans have a great deal in common historically; others disagree. Do you think that Asians in America are historically:

Reference image for question below



Americans with ancestors from which of the following geographic areas should be considered Asian American? *(Respondents were free to select as many of the below options as they felt appropriate.)*

- East Asia (dark blue)
- Southeast Asia (light blue)
- South Asia (magenta)
- Central Asia (red)
- North Asia (orange)
- Middle East (green)
- Pacific Islands (outside of picture)

If you want to add more detail to your answer to the last question, please do so below: