

Race The world in black and white ...



Relations Week

... as well as red, yellow, beige, pink, nutmeg, mauve, puce — well, you get the idea. It's a veritable rainbow out there in the real world. So why is our discourse locked into black and white with no shades of grey?

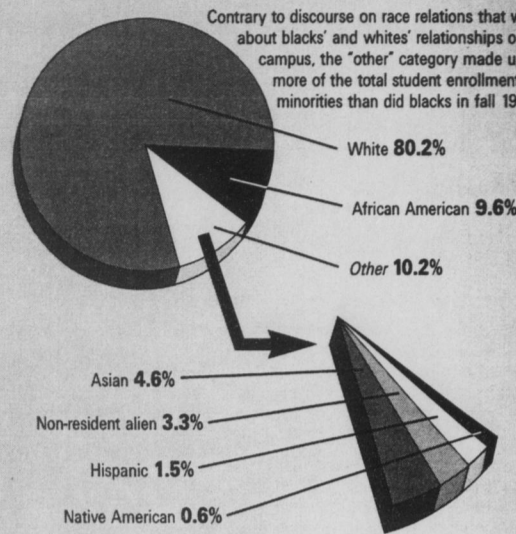
Usually when anyone discusses race relations, particularly during things like the University's Race Relations Week, they often limit conversation to ways whites and blacks can better interact outside of the workplace or the classroom without altercation. The mentality taken during such discussions suggests that the only people of different ethnic backgrounds are black or white, forgetting the many cultures often referred to as "other" that exist in our society.

People who fall into that "other" category, consisting of Hispanic, Asian and

Native Americans and non-citizens of the United States, made up 10.2 percent of the total enrollment for fall semester 1996. That was .6 percent more than the total enrollment for African American students. With that in mind, it's amazing that society generally excludes non-blacks and non-whites when discussing issues surrounding racism and discrimination.

Including people of all cultures and ethnic backgrounds in the discussions about society's race problem is the only way to find concrete solutions, rather than special

Distribution of students by race

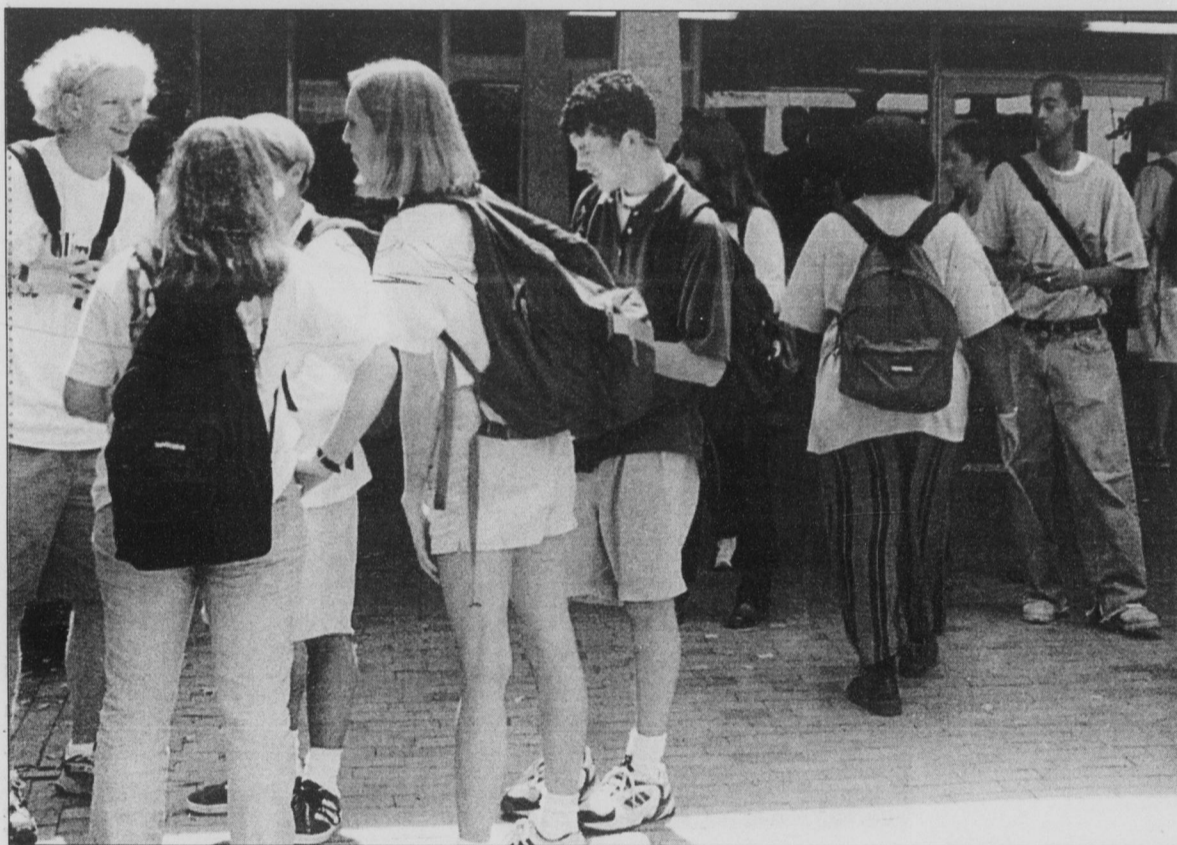


SOURCE: OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

DTH/JAKE ZARNEGAR

weeks or frivolous discussions for diversity, equal opportunity and understanding to better get along.

TEXT COMPILED BY DEVONA A. BROWN



DTH/ZEBULON HOIZ

While most people would notice that these students congregating outside of Union Station have segregated themselves along color lines, few would notice that no Hispanic, Asian or Native Americans are integrated among either group.

South Asians accepted because of assimilation

Race relations is often a difficult subject to discuss, despite the time the campus sets aside a week to "celebrate" it. And even when we do get together to talk, we most often scrutinize race relations as a black and white issue. However, when I was approached to write this column, I was asked to ponder the question, "Do I, as a South Asian, feel included on this campus?"

After carefully thinking about my response, I guess I've decided the answer is probably not. You must realize that I can't speak for the entire South Asian community. This is primarily because I think the question is a personal one that is difficult to comprehensively answer. Nonetheless, I'll share what I have specifically observed at this University.

First, let me state that to a small degree there is some acceptance of the South Asian culture. But even this statement has to be qualified, because the fact is, what most people know about South Asia stems entirely from the North Indian perspective.

However, there are handfuls of people who truly care about the enlightenment brought about by intercultural exchange. With a scholarly pursuit, these few immerse themselves in different cultures to learn more about themselves. It's not that difficult to point them out, they are the ones who live in UNITAS or stick out like sore thumbs at Sangam meetings. But like I said, those people are few and far between.

As for the rest of the University, if they accept us and include us, it is not because of their eagerness to learn from us.

Instead, it is because of our willingness to assimilate into their culture, or into the typical "American" culture. And of course, there are those of us who have been more willing to assimilate than others.

This willingness to assimilate may explain why the Asian studies department at this University is so weak.

South Asians have not taken the initiative to demand an in-depth Asian studies curriculum; and only when they see the need to academically educate themselves about their own culture will they see the potential value of such a

curriculum. In contrast, African Americans in order to maintain and highlight their diversity have passionately fought for the development of the African American Studies Program.

Generally speaking, I've noticed that South Asians have not taken as active a stand to improve race relations for themselves. This is probably due to the fact that, as a community, it's really not necessary.

South Asians on this campus, and in this country, are lucky — we usually get along with everyone. We have been endowed with a number of positive stereotypes that increase "our marketability" as a community. Consequently, we have been accepted by a number of races. I almost think the basic truth is white people like us because we are not black, and black people like us because we are not white.

Even though this is just my opinion and a broad generalization, I honestly believe this statement warrants some attention and merit. Nevertheless, for whatever social, economical, and/or political reasons, South Asians have found a niche in a number of racial and ethnic communities.

Regardless of what has been said, I ultimately see value in discussing race relations outside of black and white issues. But before the dialogue can even begin, South Asians as a community must comprehend the importance of true cultural awareness.

They will have to partially abandon the "American" culture they have come to embrace. Race relations must be redefined for South Asians. Similarly, the same discourse that has been used to improve interactions between blacks and whites must be revamped.

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Asian Americans active in racial equality quest

Historically, the Asian American community has followed the lead of African Americans in the discussion of race relations. Some would criticize the Asian American community for its difference in actively participating in the discussion. These same critics often form strange theories to explain the Asian American community's background presence. Here are three that we have heard:

1) "Asians are among the more capable and intelligent members of society and don't need the opportunities that other minority groups seek as a product of race relations."

2) "As members of a shy and permissive race, Asians are inclined to defer to another minority group when it comes to carrying the banner in the struggle for racial equality." And our own personal favorite:

3) "Asians are more like white people, thus have fewer racial tensions to resolve."

These theories are interesting and somewhat humorous all around, but they stray far from the truth about Asian Americans and their involvement in race relations in the United States. Moreover, by relying on stereotypes, the theories are inherently damaging to strong race relations.

Rather, the Asian American commu-

nity's participation in the discussion of race relations is both appropriate and timely.

We would be in error if we failed to recognize the contributions that African Americans have made in the struggle for racial equality in the United States — contributions that have, for the most part, benefited all minority groups living in this country.

However, the Asian American community has not always followed in the footsteps of the African American community with regard to race relations. At the same time, the community has not always remained silent behind the majority's status quo.

When the occasion has arisen, the Asian American community has demonstrated an ability to take firm stands on issues.

The current activism in California over new non-affirmative action-based admissions policies per Proposition 209 demonstrates the solidarity of this community.

In this particular struggle, Asian Americans are significantly more upset about the racism that has motivated the new admissions policies (which, incidentally, are still going to be ineffective

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GUEST COLUMNISTS

"To stay current, the discussion of race relations will have to move away from the long-seated focus of black and white relations ..."

in fostering diverse student bodies) than they are upset about the new policies themselves.

In general, the Asian American experience will continue to meet the challenges of the current state of race relations in the U.S.

This idea of focusing on the "current state" is, we believe, very important. The current state of an institution's demography should be the driving force behind policy making, not history.

While the cause of a current state can be attributed in large part to history, the policies themselves must not be based on history; otherwise, they run the risk of neglecting the needs of the here and now.

The implied message, of course, is that a policy needs to have room to adjust over time. As populations evolve, so too must the standards that are applied. Only then can policy be fair, and only then can race relations be eval-

uated and discussed accurately.

The future of race relations promises to be exciting as it gains more momentum than ever before. According to The Seattle Times, the rate of married interracial couples has jumped 275 percent since 1970, while the rate for same-race couples has grown only 16 percent.

The implication is that the United States is going to continue to experience a tremendous increase in the population of interracial citizens. By then, America will be a true melting pot — not only on a demographic level, but also on an individual level.

To stay current, the discussion of race relations will have to move away from the long-seated focus of black and white relations for a more inclusive, decentralized examination of multiculturalism. We are optimistic that appropriate policy-making will follow suit.

As members of the Asian American community, we look forward to continuing our participation in this valuable discourse.

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DTH/ZEBULON HOIZ

Students gather along racial lines to eat lunch in Hanes Pavilion. Even here, the line is drawn between cultures and colors.