

Asian Americans

at UNC:
UNIFIED

OR

Fragmented

Asian Students Association

Unifying Our Diversity



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Unity has been a growing catchword as the minority populations here at UNC continue to grow. Yet, the overall campus mood seems to be more apathetic than ever, and if you're Asian American, then you can just fade off into invisibility. Here are two cases in point: the Masala fashion show organized by Sangam leadership, and "Journey Into Asia," ASA's annual cultural celebration. Both were billed as events that would give people a positive experience with different cultures and that would promote better understanding between people of all walks of life. I myself believe that such activities are invaluable tools for erasing some of the Asian stereotypes that are constantly rehashed on television or in the movies. Nevertheless, few tickets were sold prior to the events despite considerable promotional efforts, and the audiences consisted mostly of performers' friends and supporters of ASA and Sangam. After all the blood, sweat, and tears we poured into organizing these events, lackluster campus participation only left our heads shaking. We're seemingly doing our part. How come the rest of the campus community doesn't even want to meet us halfway?

To understand the factors that lead to such a campus environment, one can easily, and incorrectly, point out the lack of administrative support. My experience with most administrators is that they are aware of the growing Asian American population on campus, but because this population is so new, they do not necessarily understand our needs. Thus, the burden falls (1) on Asian American student leaders to educate them, and (2) on administrators to create the atmosphere for promoting this discussion. When this happens, administrators will usually listen to any insights that we can give them. But Asian American students need to understand one important thing about talking to adminis-

trators: We are considered "overrepresented" here at Carolina because the percentage of Asian Americans on campus is greater than the percentage of Asian Americans in North Carolina. As a result, there are no administrative initiatives to help Asian Americans at school. We can expect to find allies and supporters, but as Asian American students establish their presence at UNC, groups like ASA, Sangam, VSA, and KASA will continue to offer the only resources for Asian American students. Still, we cannot become discouraged, and we must continue to fight and make a home for ourselves at UNC.

One of the largest obstacles that Asian Americans face in feeling true unity with the rest of the campus centers around history. On a campus that is 202 years old, Asian Americans here have had a very brief history. In fact, Asian American students have only been present in considerable numbers since the 1980's, a brief time period that coincidentally saw the rise of Sangam, KASA, and ASA. That's barely more than ten years, during which Asian Americans have made up a sizable part of the nation's oldest state university. Carolina is a school rich with tradition, but what traditions do Asian American students have to call their own? As the rest of Carolina struggles to stop thinking only in terms of black and white, Asian Americans are looking for ownership over their college experience. Activities like "Masala," "Journey Into Asia," Asian American Heritage Week, and *East Wind* are slowly developing into traditions that bring together the Asian American community, but more active participation and recognition from the entire campus is necessary to change these programs from simply "events" to "traditions" for everybody.

So are we as Asian Americans unified? Hardly. But the good news is that we are getting there. As ASA's Asian American Affairs Co-Chairs recently said, Carolina seems to have two factions of Asian American undergraduates: people who participate in ASA, and those who don't. I would argue that a third category exists with people who participate in Asian organizations other than ASA. There is a tendency—and a very wrongful tendency—to label those belonging to the second category as "twinkies" and "sell-outs." (I myself have often been guilty of this.) I believe that this division is the single largest threat to the well-being of the Asian American community. This message does nothing but destroy the strength and support that we could develop

within our community. Furthermore, this kind of bitterness turns away excellent individuals from getting involved with some really meaningful activities.

Asian Americans, however, must walk a very tenuous line between self-induced segregation and assimilation. In terms of the latter, I feel that the "melting pot" idea is one of the most insidious aspects of

American culture. There is the belief out there that in order to become truly American, one must let go of the "old ways" and sacrifice one's cultural and ethnic identity. This idea is wrong, wrong, wrong! True unity will never result from cultural degeneration, and unity without identity must be despised. Sure, it would be very easy to numbly join the mainstream, but only at the cost of our very own souls. America will never be strong with a society whose members do not have a strong sense of "self." As a result, Asian Americans must continuously fight the urge to try and melt with the mainstream. We all have a unique heritage, and we should be proud of it.

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On the topic of ethnic identity, people most often misunderstand the impact that groups like KASA and VSA have on Asian American unity. A common remark that I often hear is that "Asian Americans on campus are so divided because Koreans and Vietnamese have factionalized themselves off from the rest of us." But let's think about this: KASA and VSA are necessary members of the Asian American community because they provide a cultural outlook and support group that continually escapes ASA. As much as ASA tries, it will never be able to do justice to the heritage and culture of each Asian ethnic group. These are strong ties that pull at the hearts of many Asian students, and who can blame them for wanting to be with others who can strengthen the ties to their heritage? Asian American unity must not come at the cost of ethnic identity. We cannot be satisfied with just identifying ourselves as "Asian." Over two billion people live in Asia, and if we don't recognize that diversity, then we'll be no good to our families, the Asian American community, American society, or ourselves. KASA, VSA, and Sangam exist to make sure that this blindness doesn't set in.

Another common remark that I hear is that the Asian American community is not inclusive enough to include South Asians. This observation, unfortunately, is extremely accurate. I think that in an attempt to side ourselves against oppressive institutional structures, we have been too willing to overlook differences between ethnic Asian groups. No where else are these differences more obvious than in relations between the South Asian and East Asian communities, yet we have tried to forge this fake Asian American unity without respecting these differences. It hasn't worked. Again, it is going to take significant interaction and dialogue between the members of these two communities before we can bridge this gap. Asian Americans must develop a healthy respect for one another before others will truly respect us.

Unity is a difficult concept to understand and achieve, but groups like ASA are taking important strides in that direction. It's not here yet, but the word is out: With strong leadership, unity is coming to the Asian American communities nearest you.