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 From the Los Angeles Times

More specific listing of ethnicity at UC urged

Pacific Islanders and Asians at UCLA say some student groups' numbers are not recognized.

By Anna Gorman
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Frustrated by the assumption that all Asian American youths are well represented at UC schools, a coalition of Pacific Islander and Asian students at UCLA is pushing for the university to expand its demographic categories to highlight low numbers in some of those communities in hopes of boosting enrollment and outreach programs.

Advocates are collecting signatures to petition legislators and the Board of Regents this fall to change how the university system collects admissions data. They believe more information about students from smaller ethnic groups — such as Hmong and Thai — would focus increased attention on the educational barriers facing certain Asian populations.

"Pacific Islanders are just pushed under this umbrella of Asian and are never really seen," said Nefara Riesch, a Samoan American junior at UCLA. "Our small numbers are never recognized."

Asians and Pacific Islanders have several choices when marking their ethnicity on UC applications, but many of the smaller groups are not represented. And in most official reports, the students are all grouped together.

The students spearheading the "Count Me In" campaign want the UC system to create a specific Pacific Islander category within admissions data and to collect information on students from 10 subgroups, including Bangladeshi, Malaysian and Laotian.

UC officials acknowledged that some Asian communities are underrepresented and said the university system would be open to presenting more specific data.

"We're a university, so we always think more information is better," said Nina Robinson, director of policy and external affairs in UC student affairs. "The question is the cost."

In addition, she said any change to the way the system collects data would make it harder to track trends over time. But even without more demographic information, Robinson said, the university still can expand its outreach to underrepresented populations.

While growing up in East Palo Alto, Riesch said, she saw other Samoan American teenagers join gangs, sell drugs and get arrested. But her mother made it clear that she wanted a different life for Riesch and her three siblings.

Riesch earned a scholarship to attend a private high school and then got accepted to UCLA, becoming the first in her family to attend college. She plans to become a teacher.

"That was big for me — to defy that stereotype that I was going to be just another Pacific Islander that wasn't doing anything with her life," she said.

At UCLA, she sought out other Pacific Islander students but realized there weren't very many. Last fall, there were 72 Pacific Islanders at UCLA and 654 systemwide. Riesch said that by collecting more data on those students, the university would realize the need for more tutoring and peer counseling at high schools serving those populations and would devote more resources to such programs. Riesch volunteers at Carson High School, tutoring and counseling Samoan American students.

"As someone who has the privilege to go to college," she said, "it is my responsibility to take care of my family, and that family is all Pacific Islanders."

Carson High School teacher Tammy Bird, who advises the Pacific Islander club, said very few of her Samoan, Tongan and Guamanian students go to four-year colleges. Many are born into gangs, she said, and others simply don't have an interest in school.

"There is not a stress on education in the population," she said. Cindy Vang, a member of the Assn. of Hmong Students at UCLA, said Hmong youths are at a disadvantage because many grow up in low-income neighborhoods as children of refugees who speak limited English.

Vang said it was difficult coming to a campus where there were so few students who shared her background.

"It would be good to know the numbers," she said. "That could be a justification for why we need more funding to reach out to our communities."

The students' effort coincides with a state bill — crafted by Assemblyman Ted Lieu (D-Torrance) — to ensure that state-collected data would be separated into additional Asian and Pacific Islander groups, including Hmong, Taiwanese and Tongan. California collects information for 11 such groups, and the bill would expand that number to 21.

The data would parallel how the federal government gathers demographic information and would enable the state to better allocate limited resources, Lieu said. Among the departments that would be required to separate the data are Employment Development and Social Services.

"We are one of the most diverse Asian-Pacific Islander states in the nation," Lieu said. "If any state should follow the federal guidelines, it should be California."

Andy Ah Po, chairman of an advocacy group for native Hawaiians in California, said some Pacific Islanders have fared better than others and that programs "live or die based on whether or not there is data on the particular group."

U.S. census figures paint a grim portrait of the educational levels of some Asian and Pacific Islander communities in California. For example, 66% of Hmong, 58% of Laotians and 56% of Cambodians have not completed high school, according to a recent report compiled by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center based on census data and estimates. But 30% of Asian Indians and 22% of Pakistanis have advanced degrees.

"People assume it's this model minority community that is highly educated," said Karin Wang, vice president of programs for the center. "That is true for some of the community but not all pockets of our community."

Asians and Pacific Islanders are not interchangeable, Wang added. "The reality is that our needs, our histories, are extraordinarily different."

Kevin Peanh, whose parents came from Cambodia in the 1980s, is part of the United Khmer Students organization at UCLA. His parents were supportive but didn't know much about American education, Peanh said, so he and his older sisters had to navigate the system on their own. "We should be recording the progress of these new communities and how we are coming along in America," said Peanh, 20.

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