Berkeley's Changing Student Population

Academic successes by a growing Asian population are exerting pressure on current admissions policies, as well as creating a new kind of racial tension on campus

Berkeley

WHEN the University of California at Berkeley this spring acknowledged that past admissions policies—particularly in 1984 and 1987—have had a slight "disproportionate impact" on Asian Americans, it applied a soothing balm to what has been a festering sore for one of the nation's premier educational institutions. But the university's tacit admission of guilt, and its new guidelines designed to ensure fairness for all racial groups, fall far short of resolving the troubling dilemmas involving treatment of minorities, which are likely to become more pronounced with the changing composition of the college student population.

Last fall, for probably the first time in the history of any major U.S. university, a survey of Berkeley's student body revealed that less than half of the student population (48.5%) was white. Does this make Berkeley a harbinger of the future? Quite possibly. The National Center for Education Statistics in Washington, D.C., reports that since 1976, the percentages of Asians in U.S. colleges have doubled—from 1.8% to 3.6% of the total population. And that does not count foreign students.

The California numbers are even more remarkable. By fall 1986, 43% of the 448,000 Asian American students in U.S. colleges and universities were in California. Thus, the dilemmas confronting Berkeley may well eventually face other California campuses and are likely to flow eastward, where Asian students have begun to swell enrollment at top universities. In fact, there have already been similar charges at institutions such as Brown and Harvard (see accompanying story). Observes associate Berkeley professor of Asian American studies Amado Cabezas: "The situation at Berkeley for Asian Americans is a reflection of the challenge to American society in how it accepts or rejects immigrants that have traditionally become important members of society."

That challenge, in the case of Asians, goes right to the heart of science, for a large percentage of Asians on college campuses are science or engineering students. At Berkeley, for example, close to 45% of chemistry and engineering undergraduates are Asian Americans.

The status of Asian American students at Berkeley has been a hot topic for at least 5 years. Science faculty and students at Berkeley have joined campus-wide efforts to spotlight what they believe is a usually subtle, but sometimes overt, racism against Asians—both American- and foreign-born. They claim that not only are Asians made to feel unwelcome, but they are funneled into science out of all proportion to any other ethnic group—pressured to go there by a combination of forces including family and societal preconceptions about what Asians can excel in, as well as university hiring policies that have failed to provide Asian American role models in non-science disciplines.

Berkeley has traditionally been the most popular university in the nine-campus UC system. This is particularly so for Asian Americans, not only because of its prestige and location near a West Coast port of entry but because its public status makes it more affordable than the state's premier private institutions. That Asians—who make up 7% of California's population—now constitute more than 25% of entering freshmen is a remarkable tribute to their academic achievements. And competition for admission is stiff: for the coming school year, Berkeley received 21,301 applications for approximately 3,500 freshman slots. In the face of such demand, the university has adopted standards far above the minimum

Concern in Washington

Have Asians been getting short shrift in the college admissions process? That question has been simmering for several years now as the numbers of Asian Americans applying to college have risen dramatically. Gauging from estimates made in California, the percentage of Asian high school graduates who qualify academically for college is about twice that of whites. But the percentage of those admitted to college is no higher than it is for Caucasians and sometimes, at least in the past, it has been considerably lower.

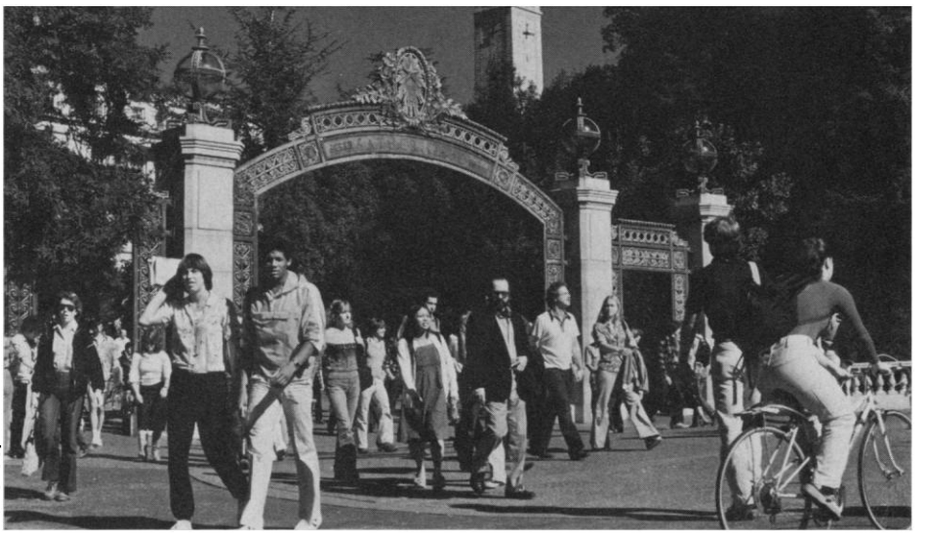
Both Congress and the executive branch have recently taken an interest in the issue. Last year, the Department of Education began a compliance review, now in process, of two institutions, Harvard and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), to determine if there have been any violations of the 1964 civil rights law. And in June, Representatives Dana Rohrabacher (R–CA) and Patricia Saiki (R–HI), claiming that "informal quotas against Asians" exist at some institutions, submitted a resolution calling on colleges and universities to review their admissions policies.

Determining whether discrimination exists will not be easy. Although Asian Americans complain of subtle discrimination on campus, the question of bias in admissions is a complicated one, the answer to which depends in part on what is perceived to be the ideal student mix. Academic ability is by no means the only criterion used in the increasingly complex admissions process.

Sociologist David Karen of Bryn Mawr College, who has done a study of admissions policies in higher education, says the main problem is that Asians frequently present themselves—and are often perceived by admissions officers—as a group that puts particularly high emphasis on academic achievement. The usual argument is that this comes at a price: while Asian students are well represented in extracurricular activities linked to academic work, they are less involved in activities such as sports, bands, or community service.

Some critics of admissions practices have compared the treatment of Asians with that of Jews, who, says Karen, used to be stereotyped as single-minded grinds. At Harvard, which sharply reduced its Jewish admissions in the 1920s, Karen says Jews were seen as "messing up the

Rep. Rohrabacher



UC Berkeley

A new look. *The mix of students crossing the quad at UC Berkeley is changing.*

needed for entrance into the system. To be admitted solely on academic criteria for the 1989–90 school year, an entering freshman had to have at least 7240 out of 8000 possible points under the school's method of tabulating grade point averages and scores on standard entrance exams.

For the past 3 years, at least, the admissions rate of Asian Americans has been close to that of whites. For the 1989–90 academic year, for example, 35.5% of Asian American applicants were admitted compared to 34.3% of whites. But that does not mean admission practices are fair in the view of a number of groups who formally charged that the school's policies systematically discriminated against the school's growing Asian American community.

In 1987, in the face of campus and community pressure, the academic senate and chancellor Ira Heyman both appointed panels to study the issue. The senate investigation, chaired by anthropology professor William Shack, reported last February that an analysis of admissions procedures from 1981 to 1987 revealed a very small statistical bias favoring Caucasians over Asians. It concluded that on average 18 more Asian Americans should have been admitted for each of those years—a change amounting to less than 0.5% of new admissions.

While in 2 years—1984 and 1987—campus policies may have prevented as many as 50 Asians from being accepted, the report concluded that in no case was there evidence of systematic bias against Asians. Nor did the committee find convincing evidence of a decision to cut Asian enrollment. The senate panel noted that the policies that adversely affected Asians in those two years—notably cutbacks in a 1984 financial aid program—were changed soon afterward.

The report outraged members of the Asian community, who called it a whitewash. Asian student, faculty, and community leaders argued that the report failed to propose any serious mechanism for resolv-

grade curves" because they were "memorizing their books." At that time, says Karen, students were supposed to be "gentlemen." Now, they are supposed to be well rounded, creative, sporty, and public-minded.

But for Representative Rohrabacher and several of his colleagues, the argument is a simple one: Asians students are held to a higher standard than their Caucasian peers. They point, for example, to data showing that Harvard requires higher admissions test scores for Asians than for everyone else.

Admissions officers say these figures are either inaccurate or out of date, although in at least two other universities, Brown and Berkeley, investigations by the schools' administrations concluded that there had been some discrimination in the past and have adopted measures to eliminate it.

Most of the information collected by Rohrabacher's office comes from a 1986 article in *The Public Interest*, authored by John H. Bunzel and Jeffrey K. D. Au of the Hoover Institute, which reviews policies at Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, and Brown universities. According to the article, Asians then accounted for about 10% of the applicant pool for these schools, but only 8% of freshman enrollments. It says Asian admission rates, very high in the late 1970s, have dropped as applications have shot up.

According to Bunzel, Brown showed the greatest decline. By 1983, he wrote, the Asian admission rate was 70% of the overall admission rate. Indeed, a committee at Brown that reviewed the situation in 1985 concluded that "Asian American applicants have been treated unfairly in the admission process." This was primarily attributed to bias and stereotypes—such as the idea that Asians are too narrowly focused in their interests—which resulted in lower ratings for Asians on nonacademic criteria.

Since then, however, Brown's admissions director Eric Widmer says that the university has cleaned up its act. He says the admission rate for whites and Asians is now the same—23%—and that 12.4% of the 1989 freshman class will be Asian American. Widmer adds that if Asians were lacking in broad interests in the past, they now appear to be "every bit" as well rounded as anyone else.

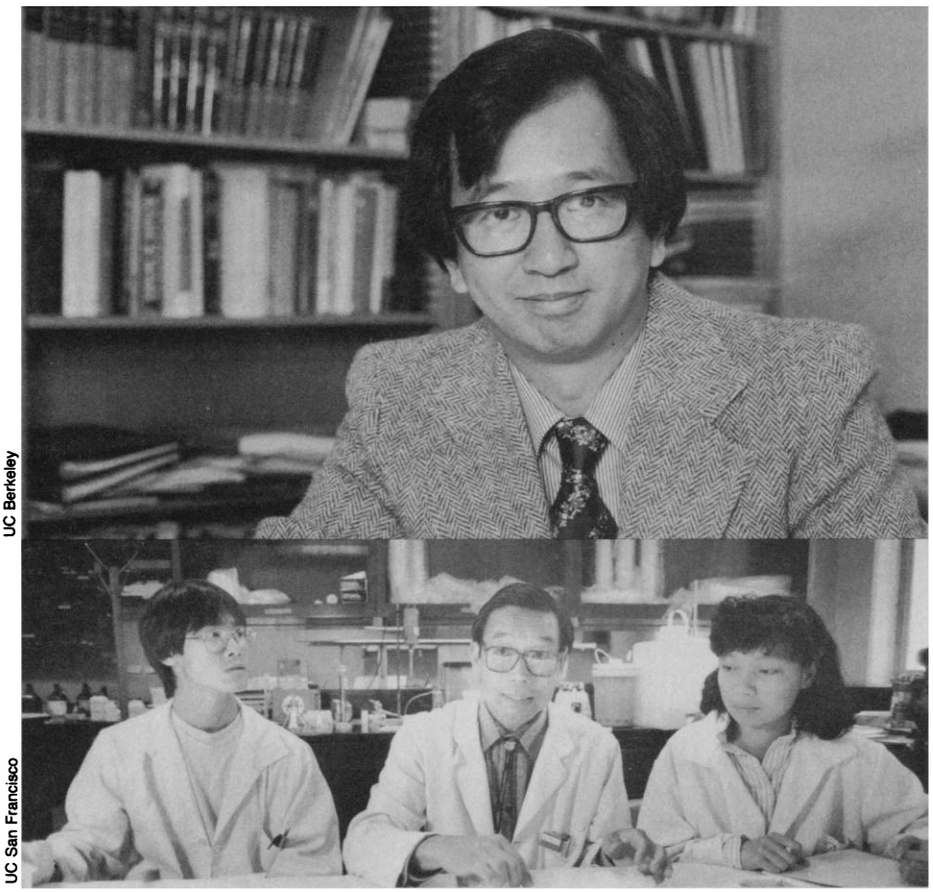
The Department of Education will not say why it decided to investigate Harvard and UCLA, and admissions officers there say neither has received any formal complaints of discrimination. Nonetheless, UCLA came in for a spate of criticism after an ABC "20/20" program aired last spring. It revealed that UCLA undergraduate admissions director Rae Lee Siporin said in a 1984 memo that the university should "endeavor to curb the decline [in numbers] of Caucasian students." Siporin says that this was mistakenly taken to imply a need to reduce Asian admissions. This problem, she says, has actually been addressed by keeping the overall number of freshman admittances high. Last year's admission rate for Asian Americans was slightly higher than that for Caucasians and this year's freshman class will be about 22% Asian. She says all competitive admissions decisions are made purely on academic qualifications.

At Harvard, in contrast, admissions officer Susie Chao says that only 10 to 15% of admissions decisions are made solely on academic merit. She says that while Asians are "slightly stronger" academically, they are still somewhat weaker when it comes to extracurricular activities. Nonetheless, she says, Harvard probably tops the members of the Ivy League in Asian representation. Last year, 13.2% of freshman enrollees at Harvard and Radcliffe were Asian Americans, and this year they will make up 17.1% of incoming freshmen.

The disproportionate representation of Asians in higher education is magnified by the fact that they have consistently higher retention rates than any other group and are particularly concentrated at the highest ranking institutions.

Gaining admission to top universities has traditionally been a traumatic process for high school students. Now universities face their own traumas as they struggle to balance their multiple missions.

■ CONSTANCE HOLDEN



UC Berkeley

UC San Francisco

Seeking diversity. *Berkeley chemist Y. T. Lee (top) argues that ethnic diversity means nothing unless there is mixing. Asians are being increasingly funneled into science classes.*

ing the problems of Asian Americans and urged the university to take more active steps in confronting the issue.

The Asian community was more encouraged by events this May when a special committee recommended new freshman admissions policies for implementation beginning in 1991. None of these changes will drastically alter campus makeup, but they nevertheless have received widespread support from minority groups.

Among changes likely to be adopted is an increase in the percentage of freshmen admitted solely on academic criteria from the current 40% to the pre-1987 level of 50%. Another potentially important change is the creation of a secondary review category for the socioeconomically disadvantaged, regardless of race. Sociology department chairman Jerome Karabel says that while the new rules won't affect ethnic percentages much, they will result in a wider socioeconomic mix at Berkeley.

"We believe that it will be possible to create a student body that is even stronger academically, and even more diverse socially and economically, than the student body we now have," he says. This could hurt upper and middle class white applicants, but Karabel stresses the changes will displace at most a few hundred students.

But larger and more subtle problems remain, according to "Asian Americans at Berkeley," a report to the chancellor, written by head librarian Janice T. Koyama and Nobel laureate chemist Yuan T. Lee. This report went beyond admissions policies and looked at prevailing attitudes toward the Asian community on campus. White students were seen to resent the relatively large numbers of Asians and to label them as "sciency" and overachievers. "When I'm in classes," says sophomore Hohn Cho, who plans to pursue a double major in ethnic studies and integrated biology, "I hear stuff like, 'There are a lot of Asians in the science class; the curve's going to be really high; it's going to be hard to get A's.' "

Several students reported open hostility—anti-Asian graffiti in restrooms and even a few instances of violence. But the covert form of prejudice is reportedly more common: "Mostly it's subtle around here because at Berkeley any sort of overt opposition to Asians would obviously be unacceptable," says Cho.

The distribution of Asians in the faculty is also the subject of much concern. In engineering, for example, only 11.6% of the faculty (25 people) are Asian, while Asian American students make up 43.7% of the undergraduate enrollment. In the liberal arts, where there are far smaller percentages of Asian students, there are also fewer Asian faculty members. This doesn't please Berkeley's Asian Americans who argue that the lack of role models in the humanities is a prime reason why Asian kids continue to stream into the sciences in disproportionately large numbers. In fact, in the humanities and social sciences, only 14 of 521 faculty members are Asian.

This imbalance is reinforced by the fact that both Asian students and their families are acutely aware of the academic and occupational benefits of sticking with science and engineering. Cathy Gong, a Berkeley graduate student in science and math education, speaks of one Asian friend who added computer science to her theater arts major solely to please her parents. "A lot of Asians go into sciences because parents think they provide more opportunities for a good job," says Gong.

One step that would improve the climate for Asian students, according to the chancellor's report, would be for Asian faculty to participate more in campus affairs. Although the UC administration must be more sensitive to the discrimination issues, committee members point out part of the onus must be borne by Asian faculty members themselves. Indeed, these faculty are quoted as seeing themselves as "team players," too polite to pursue their interests aggressively. Furthermore, many are foreign-born and are reluctant to serve on committees, where communications skills are at a premium. "If this isn't corrected, the students will feel they're not part of the campus, because they don't see many Asian American faculty at a visible level," says chemistry professor and committee member Sung-Hou Kim. "This has to be solved at the faculty level first and then it's going to trickle down."

Another tack that has been taken by Berkeley officials has been to institute programs and course requirements aimed at increasing ethnic awareness. But how much these often piecemeal programs will help is anybody's guess. Y. T. Lee worries that even if admissions policies bring numerical diversity, "that diversity will mean nothing unless you have a very, very powerful force to mix [ethnic populations] together. What I worry most about is that during the past 5 or 10 years that diversity is increasing but the force seems to be lagging."

If Lee is right, then the fears of chemistry professor Kim may be borne out. "Just beginning at the admissions level, that's not going to solve the problem," he stresses. "It's more fundamental than that. A lot of students feel that somehow they are guests on the campus and that is really a serious problem because that attitude propagates on." ■ **ROBERT BUDERI**

Robert Buderi is a free-lance writer based in California.