Are Asian-Americans 'Underrepresented'?

The relationship between diversity programs and Asian-Americans has always been an uneasy one, since there are proportionately more Asians in science than in the general population. But more refined definitions of just what "underrepresentation" means may well lead to opening up some minority programs that so far have been closed to Asian-Americans.

A case in point is a decision rendered last spring by the Boston branch of the U.S. Department of Education, which opened up the state's Minority Advancement Program (MAP) to hitherto excluded groups. Three years ago Paul Bock, a Chinese-American emeritus professor of engineering at the University of Connecticut, charged that MAP, which is designed to enhance the minority presence in higher education, was violating the civil rights of Asian Americans and American Indians by excluding them from the program. Bock contended that MAP, which spends about $1.2 million a year on programs to get more minority students, faculty and staff into higher education, should calculate a group's underrepresentation in relation to the available pool of "relevant" people, rather than to the general population.

The groups in question were left out when the program was started in 1985 because officials thought they were already adequately represented. Only 0.61% of Connecticut's population is Asian-American, yet they comprise 1.5% of the college students and 1.73% of the higher education workforce. Corresponding percentages for American Indians are 0.15%, 0.3%, and 0.10%. On 7 May, though, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights agreed with Bock that the program "should have used relevant student and labor market data, rather than general population data, to determine which racial and ethnic groups were underrepresented in the Connecticut higher education system."

The state Board of Governors for Higher Education is currently revising the MAP program, but it's easier said than done. In this case, "no party could suggest what was relevant data," says Valerie Lewis, the board's deputy commissioner. So Connecticut is trying to figure that out with the help of demographic information from the latest census. For example, for a college president, the "relevant" pool would be nationwide, whereas for some staff jobs it might be the pool of qualified local personnel.

Lewis says that the significance of the decision is in large part symbolic. But although she believes MAP is better for it, she readily acknowledges that this is yet another example of how confusing the world of affirmative action has become. Other observers agree. "The whole area is just a morass," says Barbara Lerner, a Princeton, New Jersey, lawyer and consultant. There are number of ways of defining underrepresentation and people choose the definition they think will serve their ends, she says. But one thing that's clear, she adds, is that "general population figures never make sense" as the basis for determining underrepresentation.

Although when to include Asian-Americans in diversity programs remains a puzzle, several government investigations have made it clear that when it comes to general admissions policies, Asian-Americans must not be held to a higher standard than whites. In 1989, the University of California, Berkeley, confessed that in some previous years, a disproportionate number of qualified Asian-American applicants had been turned down (although an investigation found no evidence of systematic bias). But today, at Berkeley, as well as at UCLA and UC-Irvine, there are more Asian-Americans than whites among entering freshmen, school officials say.

Still, the issue has not vanished. In many private schools, contends Berkeley chancellor Chang Li Tien, it is still the case that "Asians require much higher test scores to get in." And Tien says that despite the strong Asian-American presence in graduate programs in the sciences, "they're still underrepresented" in relation to the number of qualified Asian-American college graduates—the standard of comparison that would be implied by the Connecticut ruling.

–Constance Holden

be black, and there's a great sense of joy in that," says Spencer. He adds that white professors may not realize the importance of such a community—because they enjoy one automatically.

One implication is that schools should think in terms of hiring more than one minority faculty at a time, says England, provost at Temple. "If all you do is hire one minority faculty member in dept x, you'll find that you'll lose that faculty member in pretty short order," he says. "It's important to have some critical mass, so that the people who come to your university will have colleagues. People need friends." Cluster hiring gives new faculty an automatic support group and provides enough minorities to share the committee burden. Of course, that requires plenty of openings—a luxury few universities have today.

But even without dozens of other minority scientists, a few key faculty mentors can help keep new professors from being stretched too thin. When developmental botanist Maria Elena Zavala, who is Hispanic, arrived at California State University, Northridge, for example, her department chair took her aside and warned her to stay off certain committees; he also discouraged others from asking for her participation—a practice mentioned by many as a powerful tactic to keep them on track. "The department did whatever it could to support me," says Zavala. "Everyone should have a boss like that."

When Sandra Murray arrived at Pittsburgh, on her very first day at work, while she was still unpacking boxes, "The only other woman in the department walked down the hall, stuck her head in, and said, 'So, are you writing your grant yet?'" It was a clear signal, a reminder, says Murray, of what her priorities should be. After all, the point of all these interventions is not just to make minorities feel welcome but to help them do the best science they can.

The most basic solution of all, of course, goes back to the source of the problem: that tiny pool of Ph.D.s. Universities themselves are responsible for producing new doctorates, so this remedy ought to be within their control. If Duke is any guide, then there are grounds for guarded optimism: As part of its black faculty initiative, the university also pledged to double the number of black Ph.D. students. Although the school fell short of its mark in hiring minority faculty, they actually exceeded their goal for students, and the number of black graduate students has risen from 20 to 55 today, including 15 in science and engineering.

–Elizabeth Culotta