

Reflections of a URA: Navigating Identity and its Impact
By Amallia Sularno

I applied to HCAP's Undergraduate Assistant (URA) program two times prior before I got in for the Fall semester. The first rejection was alright, not everyone gets it on their first try, but the second one was disappointing. For the third time I knew I had to sign up as soon as I could, but I also told myself I should give up if I couldn't get in a third time.

Fortunately since you're reading this I got in. As cliché as it sounds, I think I was meant to join the URA this time around. I think being a part of the program during this Fall semester allowed me to reflect on my own journey of being an Asian American student.

Through our research, one major aspect of learning about the different attitudes Asian Americans have in different areas, such as Affirmative Action and racial stereotypes, are that Asians are not a monolith. This was emphasized through the readings, such as when we read "Tracing Roots of Attitudes Toward Race and Affirmative Action Among Immigrant Chinese Americans." This study by Pei-te Lien was to provide a more nuanced understanding on the different racial attitudes and beliefs Chinese Americans had. Recognizing that Asian Americans are not a monolith allows us to recognize the complexity of holding the identity.

While Asian Americans are not a monolith, there was a trend I noticed when we discussed the interviews we each had done for one of our assignments. During my own interview, I asked my interviewee, who was an undergraduate at Baruch, about the model minority myth. She knew nothing about the myth and when I addressed that to the other URAs, many reflected the same way with their interviewees. We also reflected how little some of our interviewees knew about Affirmative Action. To me, it seemed like one thing that most of the interviewees had in common was their lack of education on important topics that should ideally be more prominent in their lives.

This made me reflect back on my own level of education on the model minority myth and how much I knew about Affirmative Action. Prior to the URA program, I knew of model minority myth because of the classes I took being an Asian American minor. When it came to Affirmative Action, I knew what it was because I would hear about it on the news, but I didn't know why there was such a debate against it. However, without taking classes and without being a part of the URA program, who knows how much I would've known about any of these things now?

Realizing this does make me fear a little. If we aren't aware of certain stereotypes like the model minority myth and aren't aware of policies that benefit marginalized groups like Affirmative Action, then we won't be fully aware of the impact they have on our lives in America. We won't be aware of the negative consequences of the model minority myth on Asian Americans, and we will not be aware of the manipulation of Asian American students, like from Edward Blum, in pushing an agenda against Affirmative Action. How will we initiate a dialogue on creating change for our generation of Asian Americans, when there are many who are unaware of these circumstances that have been actively impacting our lives?

While I sound pessimistic, being in the URA program, creating a dialogue with the other URAs, and having our mentor have given me a sense of hope. The fact that we have programs like this indicates that there are active efforts being made to ensure that our generation, and those that follow, will learn more about these circumstances that actively shape their identities and impact their lives in America.