Announcer: Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students and P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, HyeJin Tina Yeo at OCCRL talks with Dr. OiYan Poon about racial justice among Asian Americans and the current attacks on affirmative action. Dr. Poon is an assistant professor of Higher Education Leadership at Colorado State University.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: It's a great pleasure to have you here, Dr. Poon, and thank you so much for your time.

OiYan Poon: Thank you so much for having me here.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Would you introduce yourself, who you are, and then what your current role is, and then can you describe your research to our listeners? What prompted you to research Asian American and affirmative action?

OiYan Poon: Sure. My name is OiYan Poon and I'm an assistant professor of Higher Education Leadership at Colorado State University and the director of a new center called the RISE Center, which stands for Race and Intersectional Studies for Educational Equity. And my research. My research is really focused on the racial politics of policies around college access, particularly about affirmative action, and of course various other issues of race and racism that Asian Americans experience in higher education.

So, that's a little bit about my research, and what prompted me to research specifically Asian Americans and affirmative action is I can actually pinpoint a person who really got me to do this. Before I started graduate school at UCLA with Don Nakanishi, I was working at UC Davis in Asian American studies as an academic advisor, and working with underrepresented and first generation college students, and especially from Asian American backgrounds.

And, while I was there, I was also an admissions reader for the university there. And so, got to really know how things work in the admissions process through a holistic review process, and started noticing the way the public talks about college access and admissions really is disconnected from how things actually work and operate. But, I think admissions professionals in offices, they're kind of in a difficult position where they can't really talk too openly or directly about how things work because they don't want people like families or students to feel any more pressure to try to essentially game the system, or be who they're
not. And so, it's this tricky place that I feel that admissions professionals and leaders are in.

And, at the same time, there's a lot of conversations about Asian Americans and assumptions that within the, again, assumptions, misperceptions, I think, that test scores are what really matters in admissions-

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Everything.

OiYan Poon: Is everything. But, it's really not, nor should it be. We shouldn't want to have a world that depends so heavily on test scores for a lot of reasons. And, I can get into that a little bit later. But when, I started graduate school with Don, I learned that he had been very active in the admissions debates in the 1980s. And, in cases where there were universities in the 1980s that we're actually actively limiting the numbers of Asian Americans being admitted to universities. And so, Don was very active in that debate and that research and he was constantly, as my advisor, just like, you should research this, you should do this, you have the right background, you have the ... and I would keep telling him, Don, that stuff is too hard and I don't want to do it.

But, just as I was about to graduate, there was a new proposal in the University of California that would open more access for students of all backgrounds, including Asian Americans to be eligible for the University of California. And, there were some people within the Asian American community that were very against the policy. And so, Don asked me to do an analysis on the data and do a study to really understand what was going on. And, he was very supportive of me and really pushed me to be out there. And I think, in that way, he was a very challenging mentor, and in some ways he always knew what I needed to do with my research. And, I appreciate that about Don Nakanishi, and he passed away several years ago. So yeah, I hope that I'm kind of carrying on his legacy of work. And, even before I knew that this was what I needed to be doing, he was the one who knew I needed to be doing this.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Now, we appreciate him, taking a lead on to you in this work. Yeah. And, especially this time of all the issues in regarding affirmative action.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. And, he was just very special because he was also, I think, a lot of people, for the field of Asian American studies itself, he was a founding giant in that field. And so, a lot of research across fields on Asian Americans, it comes from people like Don that started to lay the foundation.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: There are many different views and stances on affirmative action. And, can you explain what affirmative action is, and how it's practiced in the United States, especially in college admissions. There are a lot of misconceptions about that.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, definitely. So, historically, affirmative action came out of the civil rights movement and the acknowledgement that the United States has essentially
been founded on racism, particularly the anti-black racism and settler colonialism. And so, during the civil rights movement in the 60's, the notion of affirmative action, even if you just break down the term affirmative action, it's about actively acting to affirm, right, values of racial equity and acknowledging that systems of racism and other oppressions like sexism and classism have been in place for centuries in this country, and that we, as a nation, need to act affirmatively to unravel and deconstruct these systemic inequalities.

And so, originally affirmative action, specifically in college admissions, was practiced in a way where in some universities, and most famously at the UC Davis Medical School in the Bakke case, there were set aside slots for, in the UC Davis Medical School case, four spots for African Americans, four spots for Asian Americans, four spots for Native Americans, and four spots for Chicanos and Latinos. But, that didn't necessarily mean that they were capped at four each, but that minimally each incoming class would have to be that. So, now we know that kind of practice as called racial quotas, but that is no longer the case because in 1978 the Supreme Court ruled in a case called Bakke, University California Regents versus Bakke, that quotas were unconstitutional. So, universities and colleges should not be practicing set aside programs like that.

Also, what's really important in that case is that it changed the rationale for using race conscious admissions from one of ... it used to be, right, we acknowledged that this country has been very racially discriminatory towards minority groups. So, we should practice affirmative action and have race conscious admissions. But in Bakke, the decision shifted it from what was called the remedial rationale to the rationale that we still have today, which is the diversity rationale.

So, it's okay now to practice race conscious admissions using race as one of many factors as long as the goal is to advance a racially diverse educational environment. And so, that was initially established in 1978. And then, in 2003, there were two Supreme Court cases in Michigan, the Grutter and the Gratz cases. And, in those two cases, the Supreme Court again affirmed, yes, diversity is very important to accomplish. It is an important and valuable goal. That means that universities can use race as one of many, many factors, right? It's not the determining factor. So, nobody can check off a box on that alone. That's how they're admitted. No way. And, that's not okay.

And, in fact, in the Gratz case, the Supreme Court said providing extra points, a point preference for underrepresented minorities, or anybody based on race is not okay. So, that's unconstitutional. So, I think that's two of the biggest myths out there about affirmative action is that it's a set aside quota program, or that if you are an underrepresented minority, you get extra points, or some kind of preference. But, that's not how affirmative action works.

Instead, as was discussed in the Grutter case by the Supreme Court, and then later in the 2016 Fisher case, holistic review was essentially affirmed as a best practice in admissions. And, what that means is, like I said before, race cannot
be a determining factor. It can be one of many factors, and every single individual applicant needs to be reviewed and understood. What is your story? What is that individual student's story? Who are they? Where are they coming from? What is their big picture, their whole story, who are they as a whole human being?

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Not just only focused on the SAT or ACT scores-

OiYan Poon: Exactly.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: ... it's just you want to know more about you. How much you can contribute to-

OiYan Poon: Exactly.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: ... the diverse learning environment, that that's a holistic review.

OiYan Poon: Exactly.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Okay, yeah.

OiYan Poon: Okay, yeah.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: I'm Korean.

OiYan Poon: That was, by the way, my highest SAT score. Right? But, you don't know much about who I am, how I might contribute within a classroom, based on that number. And so, it has to be a holistic picture. Also, just being like, oh, I see a Korean woman in front of me. That's not enough. That's not holistic review, either. I don't understand. I don't know who you are, just based on hi, I'm-

OiYan Poon: Yeah. Like, okay, I don't know anything about you still, and so holistic review is understanding all of these things. And so, that's the way affirmative action works today is recognizing that we live in a very vastly unequal society, and people are coming from different schools, with different qualities, and resources in those schools. Their family circumstances are different. Some people come from wealthier backgrounds, some people come from less resourced backgrounds. We can't just use one standard to measure all of this diversity. We have to understand each person for who they are and what they could bring to the environment. So, that's what holistic review is. It's much more complicated.

I think the other myth that exists is that people, as admissions readers, we just look at the profile and you’re like, I like this person. I want this person. It also doesn't work like that. It's actually a very methodical, when it's a robust process,
when it's a strong process, it's a very methodical, I would even say a kind of a qualitative research study-

**HyeJin Tina Yeo:** Wow.

**OiYan Poon:** ... because you're evaluating a lot of data points for each individual applicant to try to get a picture of who they might be on your campus.

**HyeJin Tina Yeo:** So, just to summarize, there's no racial quota, which is illegal. Right?

**OiYan Poon:** That would be illegal.

**HyeJin Tina Yeo:** So, we don't have those racial quota, racial preference in affirmative action, and then also race couldn't be just the one factor that ... up to just examine the whole, the students' stories, or to get to know individually. I think that that's really the common belief is about those racial quota and then the preference.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah. I think people think you just check off a box and it's like, you're in, it doesn't matter who you are. No. Everything matters. That's holistic review.

**HyeJin Tina Yeo:** Can you tell us more about Asian Americans relating to affirmative action? Now, we understand what the affirmative action and holistic reviews are, and then it seems affirmative action is a complex, more complex issue, when considering Asian Americans. Myths of Asian penalty or model minority or racial mascot. It's a lot of new terminology, I actually heard, related to Asian Americans. So, can you tell us about more Asian Americans, and then share your perspectives and shed a light on affirmative action and Asian American?

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, I think that's very complicated question. Basically, the question of my academic research career.

**HyeJin Tina Yeo:** Right. I know this is a really big question. I'm sorry.

**OiYan Poon:** No, don't apologize. It's a great question, and I think that it's very complicated to think about race in the United States to begin with. And then, I think to then add in groups like Asian Americans becomes even more complicated because I think as I said, the history of affirmative action came out of the civil rights movement, which was very much led by African Americans. So, there is this dynamic of conflict between African Americans and whites in this country, and so the inequalities between whites and African Americans. And so then, the civil rights movement was primarily in the 60's.

Partly because of the civil rights movement, bans on immigration for Asians started to go away, particularly with the Immigration Act in 1965 which many believe was a direct result of the civil rights movement questioning racial discrimination. Because up until 1965, the immigration laws in the United States were very anti-Asian. You had the Chinese Exclusion Act, you had the 1924
Immigration Act that was highly racist against anyone who wasn't white, and really emerged out of an anti-Asian animus.

And so, I am very personally thankful to the civil rights movement because my family wouldn't be here. You and I would not be here probably if it was not for the Black-led civil rights movement. And so, I always remember that as a very important historical context for why I'm here, number one. And so, this is important context, but then because after '65, you started having an increase of the Latinx population, the Asian American population, which then complicates, I think, the racial terrain and dynamics of the United States.

And so, that's all background where affirmative action, I think, we often have in mind Black access to college. But, the thing is because the civil rights movement was so expansive everyone benefited because, prior to the 1960’s, Asian Americans weren't having a whole lot of access to these highly selective universities and colleges either. So, because of affirmative action, that really started opening the doors for Asian Americans in higher education, Latinos in higher education, Native Americans, African Americans, and so on. Women. Especially women, white women.

And so, when it comes specifically to Asian Americans, over time, I think that Asian Americans have their standardized test scores, the SAT scores have been relatively, on average, very high. And, I want to emphasize on average, right? Because we have a lot of within group difference and inequalities where a lot of different Asians are not your perfect test scorer. I'm one of them.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: It's a very huge, diversity ...

OiYan Poon: Huge diversity. That really needs to be underscored. And so, it's hard to talk about like, well ... but then you walk around some campuses like the one where at, U of I, right? You walk around, it's like, wow, there seems to be a lot of Asians. But, who are these Asians? What are their backgrounds? What are their stories? Are we getting to know them, who they are? So, there's this perception, I think, that oh, all Asian Americans are so academically successful. They don't need help.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Overrepresented.

OiYan Poon: Overrepresented.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Which is not true.

OiYan Poon: Right. And then, you couple that with the mythology around what affirmative action is. And, people think that, oh, it's a quota. It's a preference. So, then we have to make sure that somehow that ... there's this myth that affirmative action is about balancing the racial demographics on campuses. And again, that is not true. And so, all of these things, I think generally, we don't know how to
talk about. Asian Americans and race. Makes it very difficult. It makes it very confusing about affirmative action.

But, specifically, when it comes to Asian Americans, how they feel about affirmative action, I think that you'll get a range. I think there is a growing divide among Asian Americans around this issue, but public opinion polling continues to show that, as a group, on the whole Asian Americans across ethnic groups, with the exception of Chinese Americans today, Asian Americans on the whole, the majority is still support affirmative action.

And, for your listeners, you can look up aapidata.com, and you can see this opinion polling across time. Until about, I want to say, 2014-15 even Chinese Americans were supportive of affirmative action. But, since then, there have been several dynamics and factors that have contributed towards the decline of support among Chinese Americans. But, even then, Chinese Americans are just one group among all the Asian Americans, and so, still Asian Americans on the whole support affirmative action. But, I think mainstream media has picked up on a lot of Chinese American activism against affirmative action. And, it seems very odd, I think, to the general public's eye to see essentially a racial minority protesting against a policy that is for racial justice and equity.

So, I think that kind of juxtaposition or paradox is very appealing to the mainstream media. And so, it becomes very confusing and difficult to talk about in the public. And, I think, among Asian Americans, and among most people in the general society, there's all these myths about how affirmative action works and how college admissions works and assumptions. Well, if Asians are scoring so high on these tests, why aren't they getting in at higher numbers? But, that assumes that admissions is all about these test scores and it isn't. And, it shouldn't be about just the test scores.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Thank you. I read a report called Asian Americans and Race Conscious Admissions: Understanding the Conservative Opposition's Strategy of Misinformation, Intimidation, and Racial Divisions written by you and your colleague. And then, also an amicus brief in support of Harvard University. Could you highlight some of the findings from this brief and your research?

OiYan Poon: Yeah. So, I'll take them separately-

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Okay, yeah.

OiYan Poon: ... so, I'll start out with the report out of the UCLA Civil Rights Project that Liliana Garces and I co-authored. And, in that report, like you said, Asian Americans and Race Conscious Admissions: Understanding the Conservative Opposition's Strategy of Misinformation, a very long title, Intimidation and Racial Division. We kind of trace the history of Asian Americans and affirmative action.
So, I mentioned how, in the 1980’s, there were racial quotas against Asian Americans that were illegally practiced in certain universities. And so, we talk about that history. And so, there is that real, I think, community memory of that discriminatory case. But, what’s interesting is that even though in the 1980’s Asian Americans were saying, hey universities, you’re discriminating against us as Asian Americans in favor of white applicants, what ended up happening was anti-affirmative action activists who were white, they picked up on that, and actually said, oh, Asian Americans are being harmed by affirmative action.

Remember now, this is one of my mentors that was very active in this case. And, he was like, we never said we were against affirmative action. Because what was going on, the anti-Asian quotas, that is not ... anti-Asian quotas is not affirmative action. But, somehow I think these conservative activists decided to twist the story and make it look really bad for affirmative action. And, they started using racial stereotypes of all of these racial minority groups to put this story out there, that affirmative action was somehow racist against people of color.

So, they would say, oh, the stereotype of Asians being so academically qualified and Black and Latino and Native American students being unqualified, that affirmative action was somehow letting these unqualified Black, Latino and Native American students in, and these poor Asian Americans get left up out. In that story, the white interest is conveniently left out. So, they realize that pitting our groups against each other then allows white dominance to continue-

HyeJin Tina Yeo:  
Their privilege.

OiYan Poon:  
The privilege. Exactly. And so, we talk about that in our report. We also talk about how in the past, like in the 80’s, Asian Americans were like, hey, we’re not against affirmative action. Stop using us as a racial mascot. So, white anti-affirmative action activists were essentially using stereotypes of Asian Americans to say, I’m not racist, I’m looking out for Asian Americans. But, that’s a fake story, right? So, in that case, there's a term called racial mascotting where Asians are used as a mascot to fight affirmative action, even though we support affirmative action. And so, it's a very insidious racial tactic. And so, we talk about that. But, more recently, as I mentioned, Chinese American support has declined. And so, that's what we talk about in this report as well. And, that there's kind of four reasons that we've identified that suggests why.

HyeJin Tina Yeo:  
There are very different dynamics in there, including the immigration, generations are different in terms of the Chinese, and the how they are also using social media, right? That was a really interesting part of the report. What advice can you give us about how to engage in an affirmative action conversation for faculty and students, in particular Asian American students? Like, as you mentioned, as an Asian American student, it's also very complicated feeling when the affirmative action's conversation brought up. So, do you have any advice? And also, we discussed about the holistic admissions too, but has a holistic admissions aided the affirmative action debate?
OiYan Poon: Yeah, I think starting with the question, has holistic admissions aided affirmative action debate? I think it's important to recognize, like I mentioned, that affirmative action in college admissions today is in fact race conscious holistic admissions because of the various court cases clarifying how race can be considered as a factor. And so, it's the same thing.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Yeah, one of the factors.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. Right. So, race is one of the factors. But, most people don't understand what holistic review is, and it's hard to get away from this idea that admissions is like, oh, you get so many points somehow for high GPA and high SAT scores and so on and so forth. But, it doesn't work like that. It's not so rigid because it's about the whole story, and evaluating the whole story for various criteria and qualities that colleges are looking for, depending on the college, as does whole different stuff that they're looking for. So, maybe it has kind of made it more confusing because most people don't understand how holistic review works.

I think that the advice about engaging in a conversation, I actually have a book chapter in a textbook on sociology of race, and there's a chapter in there where I have an activity where it's an interactive because based on my previous experiences and my research on how admissions works, there's an activity in that book chapter that helps people pretend that they're an admissions committee. And, there is kind of short, very brief profiles of different fake students that then you can break up your classroom into small groups. In each small group is a different kind of college, and they come up with their mission statement. Who are they as a college? Then they have to figure out, okay, what kind of qualities are we looking for based on our mission statement, and then, okay, based on our mission statement, what is our admissions rubric? Right? How are we going to evaluate each applicant that comes our way? And then, once the small group comes up with those criteria and their rubric, then the activity gives them fake profiles of students to evaluate and pick from.

So then, I think that that actually helps because so few people understand what holistic review is. It's an activity to help people actually understand a little bit about, oh, that's what holistic review is. It's very difficult when you get stories of students where ... actually two of those fake students are students that I remember reading as an admissions reader. So, how do you figure out if you have two students that, or five students, who have very relatively similar academic profiles. Some of them had more access to more rigorous curriculum, but didn't take the hardest curriculum in their school possible. Whereas other students who attended schools with less resources and less rigorous curriculum available, they took everything they could, went above and beyond, maybe even went to the community college down the street to take extra courses, and worked 35 hours a week. Right? And, just all of these things.

Those numbers, you realize, of test scores and GPA, what do they really mean? What are we looking for? What's interesting is whenever I do this activity, almost every group always wants to go with the student who has just done
above and beyond. But then, I always point out this student didn't take the most rigorous curriculum, has a slightly lower SAT score, has a slightly lower GPA than this other student. Why did you pick one over the other? So, I think it allows for a more complicated conversation to understand holistic review. And, each of the students has different kind of ethnic and gender identities and class identities that then allows for a complicated understanding of diversity as well. So, that's one way.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Could you repeat that book title, and then your book chapter title?
OiYan Poon: Yeah. So, the book is called Getting Real About Race by Stephanie McClure and Cherise Harris. They were the editors, and then my chapter is called "I Had a Friend Who Had Worse Scores Than Me and He Got into a Better College." The Legal and Social Realities of the College Admissions Process.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Okay. That's also another long-
OiYan Poon: Very long.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: ... title, but I think that the activities you mentioned, I think that's really helpful. And then, also I learned that having a conversation with evidence is so important rather than relying on just my gut or oh, my feeling, or I what I heard, but we never know where I heard from, with what? Yeah. So, I think that that's very important for especially faculty and students.

OiYan Poon: Yeah, I hope so. It's why I wrote the chapter.

HyeJin Tina Yeo: Yeah. Yeah. Well, as we close, what call to action or advice would you share with our listeners in terms of increasing access and broadening participation via affirmative action in higher education?

OiYan Poon: So, I always feel like, like you said, it's important to know the evidence and the research. So, when I think about that, I immediately, I feel like a very easy thing that higher education can do, and maybe it's not so easy. I really feel like it should be easy, is to stop relying on these tests like the SAT and the GRE when all the research tells us, for so long, that these tests really don't mean a whole lot. And, I think this is at the heart of all of these affirmative action debates is the assumption ... anti-affirmative action advocates, they assume that these test scores mean a lot when it comes to so-called academic merit. But, that's not what the research tells us. That's not even what the College Board tells us, and they sell and make money on the SAT.

And so, if research and evidence tells us that we don't really know a whole lot about a student based on their test scores, but what we do know is that these test scores represent significant economic, racial, gender inequalities. Why do we rely on something so faulty that simply then perpetuates, I think, the inequalities that we see? And, that's the scary thing is when we think about
what exactly Ed Blum and other anti-affirmative action advocates are really fighting for. They really want these tests to be the end all, be all. The tests and the grades. And, we know tests and grades are not very reliable. I'm not a quantitative scholar. But, right. So, these are all quantitative statistical studies that show the lack of reliability for predicting academic performance in college.

_HyeJin Tina Yeo:_ There's no perfect measurement, there's no perfect scale.

_OiYan Poon:_ And, this scale is really bad.

_HyeJin Tina Yeo:_ Right. Right.

_OiYan Poon:_ Really bad. But, is really good at predicting inequality by demographic categories. Why do we use it so much? So, I feel like it's a baseless, it's an evidenceless practice. And so, yeah, that's my thing, is drop the test. And, one last thing, I know one thing that people always bring up is the Espenshade studies. So, Thomas Espenshade was a sociologist at Princeton. You know where I'm going.

_HyeJin Tina Yeo:_ Yes, I know where-

_OiYan Poon:_ And, everyone's always like, his study says that Asians have to score hundreds of points more than white applicants and other Students of Color to get into the same schools. For so many reasons, it's wrong. Right? And, and even Thomas Espenshade has said many times, publicly, that his study does not demonstrate any anti-Asian bias because methodologically the data sets that he used was from the 1990's. This is well before the practice of holistic review. So, his model does not reflect holistic review and how colleges practice review of individual applicant as a whole package. And so, it was a different time, a different practice than we have today, number one.

Number two, he only accounted for a handful of variables. But, we know in college admissions there's many, many variables. So, he couldn't account for the hundreds of variables. And so, he acknowledges that in his limitation. His analysis is not conclusive. And, the other thing was I think that, quite frankly, so what? So, Asians, on average, as a whole group, have higher test scores. But again, we go back to how admissions actually operates, and nobody gets admitted just based on test scores alone. And still, even with that in mind, Asian Americans at Harvard makeup over 22-23 percent of their undergraduate students. So, clearly, you've got a lot of Asian American students who are still getting in. And, a lot of them are not the perfect test score takers actually. They bring really interesting stories and bring a lot of different qualities and characteristics to campus.

And so, that's why they get in. Places like Harvard, they get 40,000 plus applications and, out of that pool, they have over 3,000 perfect scores.
Wow.

And, they're only letting in 1,600 students. So, you could admit several classes of perfect scores, but that's not the criteria. That's not holistic review. That also doesn't respect the applicants as actual human beings. If we only use test scores and GPA, we dehumanize people. So, that's my things. Drop the test.

I mean, is it because it's another myth of merit, we don't have this because what really, truly merit means, and what does that mean?

Exactly. Question what that is.

Yes. And, what the numbers tell us. And then, there's a quantitative research. I always have, have doubts on all these numbers. It's really totally up to how we interpret it.

Interpretation is everything. And, even if you want to say Espenshade study is wonderful and it does tell us something. Okay, here's something that no one talks about in the Espenshade study. He found that low income Asian Americans benefit from race conscious admissions, but nobody talks about that. So, which finding do you want to go with. Why only one finding? Without context. Right?

That why, I guess, we really greatly appreciate you sharing your research and your perspectives, and sharing the evidence about affirmative action research and the issues. So, we greatly appreciate you.

Thank you so much. This was fun.

Thank you.

Tune in next month, when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher at OCCRL talks with Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon about reclaiming the racial justice meaning of the term equity. Dr. Bensimon is a professor of higher education in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California.