

Got Culture? The Lack of Diversity on Cal Poly's Campus and the Attempts to Raise Cultural
Awareness

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Introduction

“It’s laughable. They definitely aren’t doing their best at being inclusive of minorities or any other underrepresented group... It just feels like Cal Poly doesn’t really care,” said theatre major Ryan Doebler when asked about diversity at Cal Poly.¹ In 2016, Asian-American students made up 12.56% of the entire undergraduate population at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.² If we take the Asian-American students that make up 28% of the undergraduate population at the University of California, Santa Barbara,³ the closest four-year institution to San Luis Obispo, we see that diversity at Cal Poly pales in comparison. Despite the lack of diversity at Cal Poly, the administration has done little to bring in more minorities to our campus. In fact, the administration at Cal Poly and non-minority students have ignored this prevalent issue on campus. While *Mustang News* often reports on the controversies regarding politics, the wage gaps, and feminism, they seldom write reports on the lack of diversity at Cal Poly. Instead of relying on the administration or student media to address the issue, students of various ethnic student organizations have set up several orientation programs and clubs in order to attract more minorities and to create a familiar environment for them in their transition to college life.

The rise of ethnic student organizations has been under criticism for decades. Critics argue that students who joined these cultural clubs gave others the feeling that they were being “ethnically victimized by other student groups.”⁴ For them, these clubs are just another form of

¹ Taylor Payton, “Cal Poly’s Diversity Problem,” *The Huffington Post*, April 15, 2016, accessed January 29, 2017, <https://goo.gl/ax4IF1>.

² Cal Poly, “Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo: 2016 Common Data Set,” last modified December 28, 2016, accessed February 6, 2017, <https://goo.gl/Ct3Uky>.

³ UCSB. “2015-2016 Campus Profile.” Last modified February 2016. accessed February 14, 2017, <https://goo.gl/1ZbVX6>.

⁴ Michelle J. Nealy, “Do Affinity Groups Create More Racial Tension on Campus?” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, March 10, 2009, accessed February 14, 2017, <http://diverseeducation.com/article/12376/>.

segregation and “building up of cultural barriers”.⁵ What they fail to realize is that most ethnic student organizations are created in response to racism and alienation from non-minority students. Supporters of these organizations believe that ethnic-themed student organizations are crucial to a student transitioning to college life by trying to find an environment that feels close to home. In a study done by Amaury Nora and many other scholars, this sense of belonging influenced underrepresented students’ academic persistence and success.⁶ Minorities who experienced a “culture shock” at predominantly white schools suffered academically because of the energy that is required to adapt to a different class and environment takes time away from pursuing academic interests.⁷ By joining cultural clubs, students were able to meet other students who had come from similar backgrounds and cultural traditions. A diverse campus also provides students with opportunities to be exposed to new perspectives and cultures.

From the beginning of its history, Cal Poly has prided itself on being an institution that would be attract “culture and refinement” to the city of San Luis Obispo.⁸ While the history books mention including students of all sexes and skills⁹, there is no mention of incorporating students of different races and ethnicities. Granted the school’s history was written at the beginning of the 20th century, there are implications to gender equality, yet none that allude to racial equality. While the university has emphasized that diversity is one of its main priorities,¹⁰ the truth is that Cal Poly and its administration has not tried to welcome diverse

⁵ Sadaf Ahmed, “Pride and Prejudice : Do culture-based clubs and ethnic celebrations promote self-esteem or feelings of separateness?” *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1994, accessed February 28, 2017, <https://goo.gl/BIUAKE>.

⁶ Mildred Garcia, *et al.*, *Assessing Campus Diversity Initiatives: A Guide for Campus Practitioners* (Washington D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2001), 21.

⁷ Chalsa M. Loo and Garry Rolison, “Alienation of Ethnic Minority Students at a Predominantly White School,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 57 (1986): 65.

⁸ Myron Angel, *A History of the California Polytechnic State School at San Luis Obispo* (California: Tribune Print, 1908), 15.

⁹ Angel, *A History*, 67.

¹⁰ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Luis Obispo: Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 2001).

students. Cal Poly's student body is almost 60% white.¹¹ The lack of diversity and subtle racism are not hidden secrets on Cal Poly's campus, yet the university and its administrators tend to turn a blind eye when the issue is presented to them. During the Fall quarter of 2015, the Cal Poly College Republicans club constructed a "free speech wall" in which students were free to write whatever they pleased on the wall. Things turned ugly as the wall was vandalized with hurtful and racist comments.¹² After a letter of support from Cal Poly's vice president Keith Humphrey was sent out to students, the matter was dismissed and no measures were taken to make sure this incident would not occur again. However, in 2016, the same club reconstructed the same wall and again the wall was vandalized with racist comments. The second time around, Cal Poly's president Jeffrey Armstrong issued a letter of support asking students to band together to promote diversity.¹³ Was the wall provided by the Cal Poly College Republicans club a justified act of free speech or the hidden sentiments of students who resent the small amount of diversity on campus?

In this paper, I will argue that the community of minorities at Cal Poly has been the driving factor in recruiting diverse students to the university. Despite lack of encouragement and assistance from the school, various ethnic student organizations have independently hosted events and programs to spread culture onto a predominantly white campus. After analyzing various cultural organizations and their activities on campus, Cal Poly's cultural clubs have clearly made a bigger impact on the lives of minorities than the university administrators have.

¹¹ Frank Gaspar, "Racism at Cal Poly," *Her Campus at Cal Poly*, March 23, 2016, accessed February 28, 2017, <https://goo.gl/BBjUU6>.

¹² Nick Wilson, "Cal Poly students protest 'hurtful remarks on Republican club's 'Free Speech Wall'," *The Tribune*, November 12, 2015, accessed February 27, 2017, <https://goo.gl/NHyjxN>.

¹³ Mark Powell, "Cal Poly Free Speech Wall again marred by offensive comments, drawings," *The Tribune*, November 5, 2016, accessed February 27, 2017, <https://goo.gl/5z9Kz4>.

This paper will focus on Asian-American organizations because they make up the majority of the ethnic student organizations and host the most amount of events on campus.

First Impressions and Transitions

One of the first things that students are exposed to when they come to Cal Poly is their renowned Week of Welcome orientation program. Also known as WOW, Week of Welcome was designed to help students transition into the Cal Poly community. Filled with sightseeing and outdoor activities, students are expected to have the best week of their school year or college career.¹⁴ However, for some students WOW served as a slap in the face to those who had assumed Cal Poly would be a place of inclusivity and acceptance. “I felt like I was the uncool kid nobody wanted to hang out with but no one wanted to say it to your face. I felt unwelcome and excluded,”¹⁵ said Computer Engineering major Angela Yoeurng about her WOW experience. Others shared the same sentiments as they described WOW as a time they felt “alienated and blocked off.”¹⁶ When asked about the reputation of WOW as an orientation program, Nutrition major Susanna Yu stated that she wished Cal Poly would “stop putting so much emphasis on how WOW changes lives and it's where you meet your best friends and stuff. Because it made it feel extra alienated and this was supposed to be the best experience of college.”¹⁷ However, for both Yoeurng and Yu, they used the bad experiences from WOW to seek out an environment they would feel comfortable in. Both students ended up joining various cultural clubs in an attempt to find students who shared the same traditions and ideals.

Incoming students come to college eager to find a place they belong. For some students, this sense of feeling included can be sought in Greek life. On the other hand, like WOW, some

¹⁴ Aryn Sanderson, “Week of Welcome: A history of changes,” *Mustang News*, September 16, 2013, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://mustangnews.net/week-of-welcome-a-history-of-changes/>.

¹⁵ Angela Yoeurng, interview by Alice Jang, San Francisco, February 4, 2017.

¹⁶ Susanna Yu, interview by Alice Jang, San Francisco, February 4, 2017.

¹⁷ Susanna Yu interview.

students feel the same barricade they felt in their orientation groups. Students Lianne Chun and Kathy Nguyen used Panhellenic Recruitment in order to find a place they belonged. Both Chun and Nguyen entered the process excited and nervous, yet left early after being disappointed by the program. Nguyen felt ostracized and unimportant as members of sororities would choose to talk to the bubbly blonde girls while she waited on the side.¹⁸ Chun felt alienated as girls would form fast friendships based on their backgrounds. Both girls craved a healthier environment where they would feel included and part of an organization. They were able to find this inclusion with the cultural organizations on campus.

Escaping the “Asian Bubble”

For some students, Cal Poly was an opportunity to branch out and experience a new type of climate. After immigrating from South Korea, Genevieve Jang resided in La Crescenta, a predominantly Asian neighborhood located in Southern California, for over 15 years. Jang, a Sociology major, chose to go to Cal Poly after looking at its demographics. By choosing to attend a university far away from La Crescenta, she hoped to escape her “bubble of ignorance.”¹⁹ While Jang experienced culture shock during her first year at Cal Poly, she believes that she made the right decision. Her decision to attend Cal Poly gave her an experience she would have never been able to encounter had she stayed near La Crescenta. Escaping this self-proclaimed cultural bubble is a common phenomenon among students who come from diverse environments. In her article, “The Asian College Bubble: Self-Segregation or Something More?” Julie J. Park argues that most students use college as an opportunity to break free from this “cycle of segregation”²⁰ to try and connect with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Yoeurng had

¹⁸ Kathy Nguyen, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, February 1, 2017.

¹⁹ Genevieve Jang, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, February 11, 2017.

²⁰ Julie J. Park, “The Asian College Bubble: Self-Segregation or Something More?” The Huffington Post, August 20, 2013, accessed February 27, 2017, <https://goo.gl/k6eUMj>.

the same stance on escaping her bubble in La Mirada, California. Coming from a traditional Asian family and environment, she turned down offers from schools like the University of California, San Diego and the University of California, Irvine because their demographics were “too Asian”. Yet, unlike Jang, Yoeurng’s experience at Cal Poly was filled with isolation. She described herself as “the only Asian in most situations” and stated that “Cal Poly doesn’t care about you if you aren’t white.”²¹ It was this sense of isolation that drew Yoeurng to cultural clubs on campus.

The Face of Improvement?

During the 1940s to the 1960s, student media had focused on foreign exchange students as Cal Poly’s main minority population. In fact, foreign students were not mentioned in any publications until the January 1941 issue of *El Mustang*.²² In the article “Many countries represented in studentbody at Poly,” the amount of foreign exchange students enrolling in Cal Poly was seen as a source of pride as the school’s reputation in agriculture had spread outside the West.²³ The first ethnic student organization to have been recorded in Cal Poly’s history was the Poly Chi Club.²⁴ Founded in 1952, the Poly Chi Club was created in response to the growing number of foreign exchange students at Cal Poly. In 1971, the club was renamed the Chinese Student’s Association²⁵ and is still active on campus today.

Unlike the Chinese Student’s Association, the success of Tomodachi Kai was short-lived. Tomodachi Kai, meaning “friend club”, was created in 1970²⁶ as an ethnic student organization that had specialized in exploring Japanese cultures and traditions. Yet, the history of Tomodachi

²¹ Angela Yoeurng, interview by Alice Jang, San Francisco, February 4, 2017.

²² John Carricaburu, “Many countries represented in studentbody at Poly,” *El Mustang*, January 31, 1941, 1.

²³ Carricaburu, “Many countries represented in studentbody at Poly,” 1.

²⁴ “Lion Dance and Chinese Candy Featured by Poly Chi Saturday,” *El Mustang*, February 26, 1957, 1.

²⁵ “Party will honor Boar,” *El Mustang*, February 2, 1971, 3.

²⁶ “Tomodachi Kai supports Expo,” *Mustang Daily*, April 24, 1970, 5.

Kai was rocky. Low enrollment had caused the original club to die out in 1987,²⁷ only to be revived in 2006 as Japanese Cultural Exchange (JCE).²⁸ However, just 4 years later, the club had disbanded again due to lack of student interest. In 2014, BJ Yebisu and a few other students revived JCE in response to the lack of interest in Japanese culture on campus. Renamed the Japanese Student Association (JSA), the club had been brought back to campus with a more hands-on approach. The creators of JSA had examined other ethnic clubs and had noticed that these cultural clubs had started to focus on social events rather than cultural events.²⁹ “We wanted to create a safe space for Japanese Americans at Cal Poly, and those that sympathize, or identify with some part of the culture. We didn’t wanna be a club that you just stick on your resume,”³⁰ Yebisu explained. To encourage members to stay in the club longer, the club hosts weekly events that contain several aspects of Japanese culture.

Despite their best efforts, Cal Poly’s administration has made it hard for Yebisu and his board members to host events on campus. Older publications of Cal Poly’s student-run newspapers used to boast about cultural events on campus, no matter how small the event was. These days, the only stories that are published are those that draw in large numbers of people, as an attempt to bring in more minority students. Furthermore, Cal Poly does nothing to help cultural clubs bring in funds. Ethnic student organizations at Cal Poly are currently managed by the Associated Students’s Inc. (ASI), which is managed by the administration. Yet, the only funding that each clubs receive are a \$500 stipend every year from the Multicultural Center, a facility that is unassociated with ASI.³¹ Even with the lack of support from Cal Poly, cultural clubs on campus fundraise throughout the school year to raise funds to finance their activities.

²⁷ Brian McMullen, “Cultural Club Spotlight: Japanese Cultural Exchange,” *Roots* 1 (2008): 3.

²⁸ McMullen, “Cultural Club Spotlight”, 3.

²⁹ BJ Yebisu, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, March 10, 2017.

³⁰ BJ Yebisu interview.

³¹ BJ Yebisu interview.

However, Cal Poly's strict rules on selling food and other things on campus makes this exponentially harder than it should be. Throughout the past few years, Cal Poly has made registering small club events difficult and challenging. "They [Cal Poly] require 3 weeks prior notice for events running over 3 hours, which is pretty obstructive, if you ask me. It's also because ASI won't even guarantee the space you want to reserve will be the one you end up getting," said Yebisu. The members of JSA have resorted to fundraising off-campus and holding club meetings in rooms they hope to find empty.

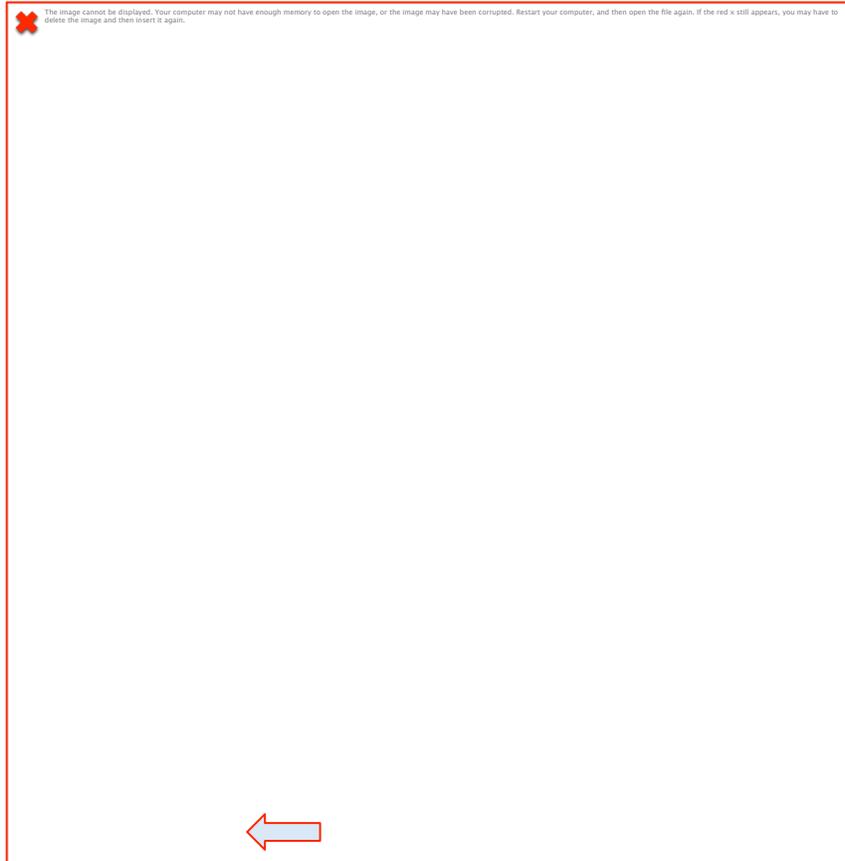
Cultural clubs have faced silent opposition from Cal Poly's administration since the 1990s. In 1993, the cultural organizations banded together to host Asian Awareness Week. Dance troupes and a martial artist had practiced routines for months in preparation for this week and the main event was seen as a perfect way to spread Asian awareness on campus. As the clubs got together to prepare for the show, they had been told to postpone their event. On stage, Cal Poly's student-run radio, KCPR had booked a mobile DJ unit³² and their event had taken precedence. The blunder had been a recurring theme in the Asian experience at Cal Poly. Despite their best effort to spread awareness on campus, many Asians felt uncomfortable with the "competitive, outgoing and sometimes hostile environment"³³ and chose to stay quiet, rather than speaking out. Students had felt drowned out by the noisy culture of Cal Poly and was not used to the "American lifestyle" of voicing their oppositions. In the article, business alumna Michelle Nepomuceno stated that "Because Asians are less vocal about it, (our) needs often take a step back."³⁴

³² Silas Lyons, "Fitting In, Standing Out," *Mustang Daily*, Spring 1994, 7.

³³ Lyons, "Fitting In, Standing Out," 8.

³⁴ Lyons, "Fitting In, Standing Out," 20.

The “competitive” and “noisy” environment was illustrated in the October 1991 issue of the *Mustang Daily*.³⁵ In the classified section of the newspaper, an advertisement for Tomodachi Kai had been squeezed in at the very bottom among loud announcements, broadcasting fundraising or rush events for other organizations. Despite being the third largest student group at Cal Poly in the 1990s, Asian students had refrained from speaking up against sort of resistance. To them, academics had always been emphasized and there was little incentive to change the role of Asians on campus.



Furthermore, when they had attempted to spread awareness, they had often been met with struggles that other clubs did not face.

Decades later, the same issues still occur on campus. “Every year we try to host our banquet, we’ve been told that Chumash has been booked by the Chi Omega sorority every year. Even when we try to book the venue in advance, they give priority to Chi O,”³⁶ said Marieke Bayens, former president of the Korean Student Association. Yebisu believes that the lack of

³⁵ “Classified,” *Mustang Daily*, October, 1, 1991.

³⁶ Marieke Bayens, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, March 10, 2017.

impact that the cultural clubs have on Cal Poly's reputation is cause for these interferences. By having events sanctioned by the school specifically for minorities, Cal Poly is able to cover up the fact that not many minorities are attending the university. "It's like when restaurants put certain food items as special to try and sell their leftovers,"³⁷ he explained. In spite of their best efforts, cultural clubs are only given priority when their events seem to have a big influence on Cal Poly as an institution.

The Lasting Legacies of Cal Poly's Cultural Clubs

While the impact of ethnic student organizations have not been profound to the university, the impact they have had on minority students at Cal Poly has been powerful. In 2016, there were 40 ethnic student organizations on campus.³⁸ Every year, these clubs are able to attract hundreds of new members from the incoming freshmen classes. During the Fall 2016 quarter alone, 148 new members joined the Chinese Student's Association. Mentioned above, the Chinese Student's Association (CSA) is one of Cal Poly's largest cultural clubs. With an executive board of over 15 people, CSA puts in tremendous amounts of effort every year to recruit new members. The same amount of effort is exerted among all the cultural clubs. What is it that draws incoming students to these organizations? Students claim that these organizations are able to create a familiar and comforting environment to freshmen and transfers who may have experienced a cultural shock from their arrival on Cal Poly's campus. "They definitely try a lot harder than most of the other clubs I've seen," said Yoeurng when asked about recruitment.³⁹ For students like Yoeurng and Yu, they were drawn to Cal Poly's cultural clubs because of their openness and willingness to make every club member feel like a valued individual. For freshmen

³⁷ BJ Yebisu interview.

³⁸ Cal Poly, "Student Cultural Clubs," accessed February 6, 2017, <http://www.deanofstudents.calpoly.edu/content/multicultural/clubs>.

³⁹ Angela Yoeurng, interview by Alice Jang, San Francisco, February 4, 2017.

who feel lost and overwhelmed in a new environment, the efforts made by older and experienced students can make students feel welcome and wanted. Additionally, the comforting setting that these clubs provide also play a huge role in the retention of students in the clubs and the university itself. By providing a climate in which students are able to feel at home, they are intrinsically motivated to stay in school participate in activities that these clubs provide that promote awareness.

Another program that helps incoming students transition to Cal Poly is PolyCultural Weekend, a welcome program held during the spring quarter that invites accepted minorities for a weekend in San Luis Obispo. PolyCultural Weekend is entirely student-run and invites all the cultural organizations to host these accepted students. During PolyCultural Weekend, students are given a host and an opportunity to explore San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly. Cal Poly's lack of diversity is a huge driving factor when students are committing to Cal Poly. By having these cultural organizations run this weekend, these clubs decrease any "concerns that a prospective student might have pertaining to diversity on campus."⁴⁰ PolyCultural Weekend proved to be a success in helping alumna Nicole Lim commit to Cal Poly. While she was touring other schools, Cal Poly stood out the most because she saw how everyone at PCW was so welcoming, a huge contrast to other schools she had visited. After PCW, Cal Poly struck her as an environment where everyone was working together regardless of ethnicity to make potential freshmen feel welcome.⁴¹

Spreading Cultural Awareness on Campus

Critics have claimed that the establishment of ethnic student organizations have promoted racial segregation but the students at Cal Poly have proven otherwise. These students who have

⁴⁰ Carly Quinn, PolyCultural Weekend: A way for students to find their niche," *Mustang News*, April 26, 2017, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://mustangnews.net/polycultural-weekend/>.

⁴¹ Nicole Lim, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, February 11, 2017.

joined various cultural clubs have found that they have learned about other cultures through being around people from diverse backgrounds and ethnic roots. By joining these organizations, minorities are able to learn about different minorities and their traditions. For these minorities, culture and upbringing is a big part of who they are as a person. For Business major Cathy Liu, her Chinese American background defined her as a person. Only after attending Cal Poly did she realize that she was able to represent herself as a Chinese American as well as learn about other cultures. "I've learned a lot more history through these clubs than I ever did in high school."⁴² For students who major in engineering, business, or the sciences, they are not given many opportunities to take history courses beyond American history. While these cultural clubs and their events are no substitution for a formal history course, they are able to provide students with a glimpse into another minority group's culture.

While ethnic student organizations have spread cultural awareness on campus, Cal Poly's reputation as a diverse campus has not improved. In an effort to bring awareness of Cal Poly's diversity to other schools, alpha Kappa Delta Phi, an international Asian interest sorority has established a program called the Central Coast Convention (CCC). CCC is a weekend where sisters of the sorority from other chapters are invited to spend a weekend at San Luis Obispo and experience the same climate that the sisters at the Cal Poly chapter get to go through everyday. However, initial setup of the program was difficult as schools across California were unaware of Cal Poly and reluctant to come to the campus. Having graduated in 1995, alumna and founder of Cal Poly's alpha Kappa Delta Phi, Christine Songco came to Cal Poly when the Asian population was close to 7%.⁴³ Towards the end of her sophomore year, Songco and five other Asian students realized that there were not enough cultural Greek organizations on campus and made it their

⁴² Cathy Liu, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, February 28, 2017.

⁴³ Christine Songco, interview by Alice Jang, San Luis Obispo, February 19, 2017.

goal to establish a new chapter of alpha Kappa Delta Phi, an Asian interest sorority. They were met with skepticism as the Asian population was extremely low. Many believed that there was no need for another cultural Greek organization as it would not cater to the needs of the current students on campus. After several road trips over California and mountains of paperwork, the new chapter was established in 1996. Even after this success, it was still difficult to draw in other schools to their CCC weekend. The sisters of alpha Kappa Delta Phi wanted to use CCC as a way to let other college campuses understand that there was a growing Asian population at Cal Poly. Ten years later, and the program has spread to various other parts of the United States and has not just been limited to California.

The United Fraternity and Sorority Council at Cal Poly has several other organizations that have spread cultural awareness on campus. Every year, the organizations Chi Delta Theta and Omega Xi Delta host Lantern Festival. Like Cal Poly's Open House, Lantern Festival is a way for organizations to set up booths to advertise their clubs while selling ethnic foods.⁴⁴ Because of the small minority population at Cal Poly, the cultural community is able to bond much more easily. Lantern Festival is a way to show how tight-knit the cultural community is at Cal Poly. "We are small, but we're loud and proud. It's a little hard for one ethnic group to stand on its own here. So we bring everyone together,"⁴⁵ described Patrick Cheung, a member of the Omega Xi Delta fraternity.

Conclusion

When incoming students come to Cal Poly, they are unaware of the cultural shock they will experience when they step onto campus. While events like "Week of Welcome" and Panhellenic recruitment, that are catered to the majority may deter some minority students, they

⁴⁴ Regine Smith, "Lantern Festival to showcase Asian American culture at Cal Poly," *Mustang News*, May 5, 2016, accessed March 1, 2017, <https://goo.gl/brjdQ1>.

⁴⁵ Smith, "Lantern Festival to showcase Asian American culture at Cal Poly."

enable students to seek other forms of inclusion. This inclusion comes in the form of ethnic student organizations on campus. These cultural clubs were created by students in retaliation to the alienation and isolation they felt as new students themselves. The lack of administrative support from the university has not hindered the efforts of cultural clubs and their achievements in bringing awareness to Cal Poly. Events like alpha Kappa Delta Phi's Central Coast Convention and Lantern Festival have shown that the lack of diversity on campus has only brought the cultural community closer. However, despite these attempts, the university as a whole does little to contribute to these efforts. When acts of racism are present on campus, the administration dismiss them as free speech and glaze over issues like the low rates of minority commitment to the university. As clubs struggle to host events on campus, they are pushed aside for clubs and events that the administration deems more significant. If Cal Poly has placed diversity as a priority like they have stated in several reports and addresses, they have only succeeded due to the efforts of cultural organizations on campus.

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