Imagine that you're a parent, teacher, or counselor who helped a promising student apply for financial aid. She's an underrepresented minority, so you encouraged her to apply to several scholarships for minority students. A few weeks later, she receives a wave of responses from them, all saying the same thing: She's not eligible to apply. Why? Because the colleges have misclassified her; even though she's an underrepresented minority student, they've decided to treat her as if she's not.

Now imagine that instead of one student's being misclassified, this is happening to every student who belongs to one of the fastest-growing minority groups in America. Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders don't need to imagine any of this. This is their reality.

For more than 20 years, U.S. Census data have shown that Pacific Islanders are far less likely to graduate from college than is the general population. The statistics have fluctuated slightly over time, but the trend is that Pacific Islanders are about half as likely as the general population to hold bachelor's degrees, and even less likely to receive advanced degrees.

Despite the clear data, Pacific Islanders are not eligible for many scholarships and fellowships designated for underrepresented minorities. I learned about this firsthand when I was an undergraduate. A friendly, well-intentioned representative from a scholarly program explained to me that, basically, "Pacific Islanders are Asian Pacific Islanders, and Asians are not underrepresented, so Pacific Islanders are not underrepresented."

That program eventually changed its policy, but many other well-intentioned scholarship and fellowship sponsors are still making
the same mistake. As a consequence, they are limiting their own ability to help underrepresented minorities, and limiting opportunities for Pacific Islanders to achieve their full potential.

This misclassification has real consequences for students and their families. For a Pacific Islander who would be the first in his or her family to pursue higher learning, a scholarship could make the difference in going to college or not. Even for those who would go to college either way, it can determine whether that degree is accompanied by boundless possibilities or crushing debt. In any event, Pacific Islanders face the reality of being a minority while also being denied access to resources intended to level the playing field.

Why is this happening? Before 1997, the federal standard for racial classification grouped Asians and Pacific Islanders together. But 16 years ago, the standards were updated, and Pacific Islanders and Asians were recognized as two distinct groups. Unfortunately, the myth of a homogeneous "Asian Pacific" race persists, and the use of "API" data suggests that statistics on "Asian Pacific Islanders" reflect the conditions of both Asians and Pacific Islanders.

They don’t.

Asians are more than three times as likely as Pacific Islanders to hold bachelor’s degrees. They are nearly five times more likely to hold advanced degrees. Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders have formed lasting coalitions and often work together on common issues, but cross-racial collaboration is not grounds for ignoring the needs of either group.

What’s more, with the smallest population of the five federally recognized standard racial groups (African-Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and whites), Pacific Islanders are always at risk of being forgotten in national discussions about education issues. This is further compounded by the fact that half of the Pacific Islander population lives in Hawaii and California, so scholarship managers in states like Illinois and New York are unlikely to have a Pacific Islander
colleague or hear from a Pacific Islander faculty member. Given that the Pacific Islander population is growing three times faster than the general population, some of this invisibility will be reduced over time, but even the wildest optimist would not conclude that population growth alone will solve this problem.

So, what can we do? I believe in a three-step solution: Raise awareness, ask the people with the power to properly categorize Pacific Islanders to do so, and repeat those first two steps.

This is the core of our strategy at the Pacific Islander Access project, a nonprofit corporation founded to increase Pacific Islanders' access to higher education.

A small group of students and professional volunteers has studied this issue and developed a sample of scholarships and fellowships for underrepresented minorities. After completing that study last fall, we started contacting the programs that were misclassifying Pacific Islanders. We shared our data, made our argument, and asked them to change their policies. In most cases, we asked several times.

Five of the scholarship sponsors (out of a sample of 50) have voluntarily changed their policies and opened their doors to Pacific Islanders. As a result, the percentage of scholarships in our sample that exclude all Pacific Islanders has been reduced to 50 percent. (Of the rest, 38 percent include all Pacific Islanders, and 12 percent include some groups like Native Hawaiians or Samoans, while excluding others.) We hope that this will be part of a growing trend that will lead to the end of misclassifying Pacific Islanders altogether.

Whether our hopes will be realized depends on the scholarship and fellowship organizations themselves, and on whether we remember this: When President Obama proclaims each May to be "Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month," the "and" between "Asian-American" and "Pacific Islander" serves as an important reminder. It reminds us that these are two distinct and separate racial groups—and one of them is significantly underrepresented in higher education.