The Cosmopolitans: Filipino Inter(national) Students and the American Empire in 1917 and 1921

By Lizzy Spaeth

College administrators have scrambled to lobby for visas for international students and create policies that will welcome them to the American higher education system in the back-to-back crises of reduced migration under Donald Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic. The financial significance of international students has never been so salient. The contribution to the U.S. economy from international students fell by $9.5 billion from $44 billion in 2020 due to migration restrictions and associated experiences of racial discrimination and xenophobia, and the total number of international students has fallen from its peak in 2018 of 1.1 million. The economic importance of international students in the United States has corresponded to structural changes in the American economy and geopolitical events. Decades before international students dominated STEM graduate programs, thousands of Filipinos studied in American universities as colonial subjects and American nationals. This project uses the directories of Filipino students from two years, 1917 and 1921, to demonstrate the geographic scope of Filipino students in the early twentieth century and the universities where they concentrated.

Method

To create the maps at the right, I digitized the Filipino student directories in an Excel file, sorted them by name, address, college major, and school of attendance. I then uploaded the Excel file into ArcGIS and created labels to show the names of the students. I also color-coded them based on which university they attended. Users can view additional information when they glide over the label in ArcGIS.

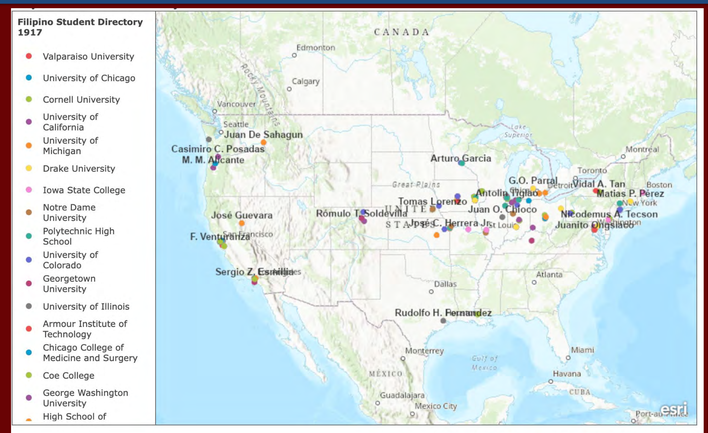
I also created ArcGIS maps of the distribution of all international students in the United States using data from the Institute of International Education (IIE) annual reports for a few key years.

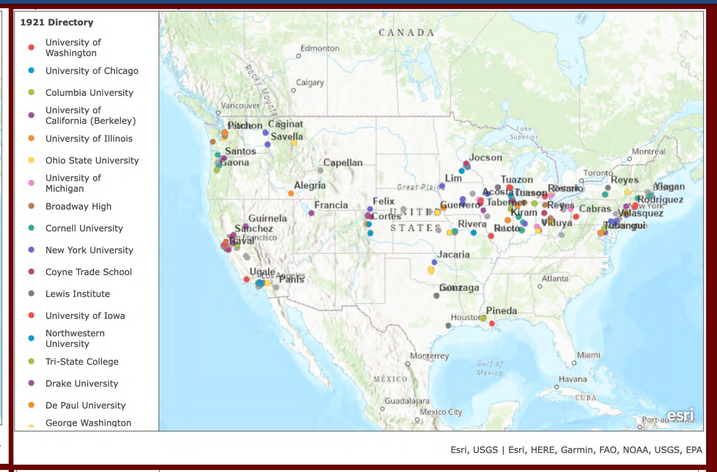
To access the maps on the right, please use this QR code or go to https://arcg.is/1j05LD1.

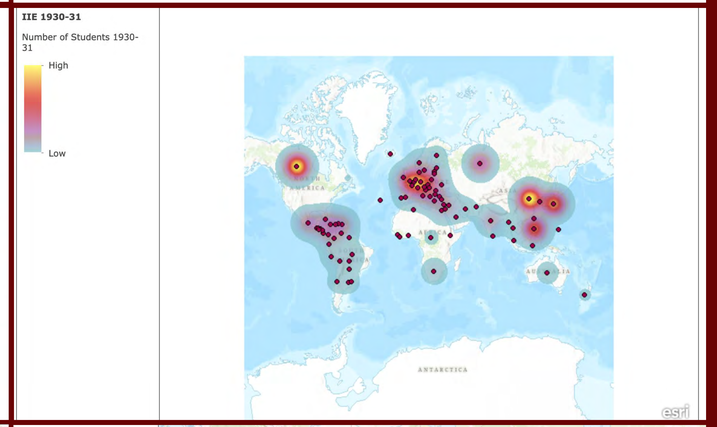
Results

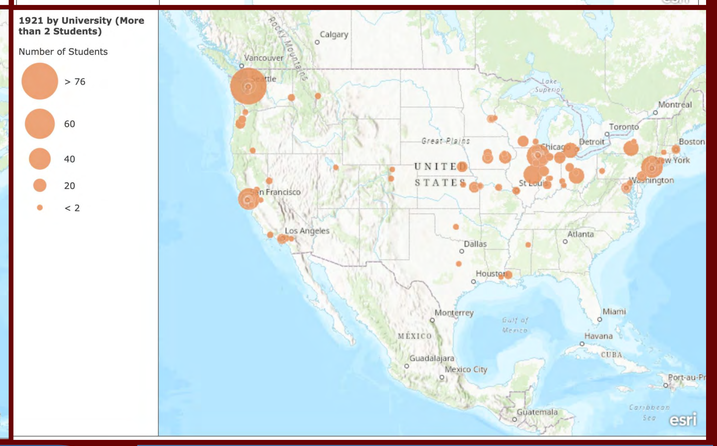
The maps to the right demonstrate the wide distribution of students from the 1917 and 1921 Filipino cohorts. These maps will help me to determine which university archives I should focus on for my future research. They also pose new research questions. The number of students dramatically increases from 1917 to 1921. How is that related to WWI? Why did a few universities such as Valparaiso have such large concentrations of Filipino students during the war? The Midwest in general is surprisingly dominant in the 1917 data. Why is that? I had expected a distribution of students like that reflected in the 1921 data where the largest concentrations of students are at universities on the coasts like UW, UC, and Columbia, but UChicago and UIUC still dominate the list.

The IIE data demonstrates that the largest concentrations of international students in the 1920s and 1930s came from Canada and Asia, despite restrictive immigration policies. Even in the early twentieth century, students came from every continent except Antarctica. These maps demonstrate the long-term importance of international students and both their widespread geographic origins and impact in the United States.









I am currently writing my dissertation proposal, which I will defend at the end of the semester. I will connect how philanthropies, the United States government, and academics theorized economic development in the Philippines and Puerto Rico and connected it to the students who were studying at American universities. I will contextualize the students themselves in terms of their social networks, club and sports affiliation, college majors, and their postgraduate employment and social lives. I will also trace the top-down and horizontal growth of the international student movement through government records; philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller and Ford foundations; university affiliated organizations such as the Crossroads International Student Center in Chicago, the Christian Family Movement Records, and the Young Men's Christian Association; and national organizations such as the Institute of International Education and the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors. I will represent the growth of these social and political networks through digital visualizations and the analysis of photographic and visual evidence such as event menus, in addition to traditional textual sources such as letters, memos, and reports. I plan to use digital humanities tools across my dissertation, but there are a few key chapters that would benefit from social network analysis through Net.Create. I will also continue to use mapping. I plan to finish inputting the IIE data into ArcGIS to demonstrate the change over time of the geographic distribution of students.

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