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Debunking the Concept of 'Race'

Black Americans who explore their family histories typically hit a dead end in the 19th century, when black Americans who were slaves were not listed in the census by name. Now some black Americans are trying to fill in the gap with genetic screening tests that purport to tell descendants exactly where in Africa their ancestors came from. But, like most people, those who think of themselves as African-American will need to search well beyond Africa to find all of their origins.

This point came through with resounding clarity recently at Pennsylvania State University, where about 90 students took complex genetic screening tests that compared their samples with those of four regional groups. Many of these students thought of themselves as "100 percent" white or black or something else, but only a tiny fraction of them, as it turned out, actually fell into that category. Most learned instead that they shared genetic markers with people of different skin colors.

Ostensibly "black" subjects, for example, found that as much as half of their genetic material came

from Europe, with some coming from Asia as well. One "white" student learned that 14 percent of his DNA came from Africa — and 6 percent from East Asia. The student told *The Daily Collegian*, the student newspaper, earlier this year: "When I got my results I was like, there's no way they were mine. I thought it was just an example of what the test was supposed to look like. Then I was like, Oh my God, that's me."

Prof. Samuel Richards, who teaches a course in race and ethnic relations at Penn State, uses the test results to shake students out of rigid and received notions about the biological basis of identity. By showing students that they aren't what they think they are, he shows them that race and ethnicity are more fluid and complex than most of us think. The goal is to make students less prejudiced and more open to a deeper discussion of humanity. If the genetic testing fad pushes things in this direction, it will have served an important purpose in a world that too often thinks of racial labels as absolute — and the last word when it comes to human identity.