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Practitioners Essay

# Asian American Native American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions Empowering Students Civic Engagement toward Social Justice Agendas

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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked the civic mobilization of various communities of color, including Asian Americans. This chapter discusses the corresponding role of Asian American Native American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) within this context, serving as critical sites in cultivating Asian American students' civic engagement toward social justice agendas. Educational research, scholarship, and personal reflections of practitioners are integrated throughout the chapter to discuss how AANAPISIs at Sacramento State and Coastline College fulfill this call by providing culturally relevant and community responsive programs and practices influenced by an ethnic studies framework.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The legacy of racial injustice and violence in the United States dramatically unfolded amid a global pandemic, seemingly reviving the urgency to participate in social justice agendas. A sense of powerlessness grew rampant nationally as people were in lockdown to prevent coronavirus cases and deaths, yet many in droves were mobilized to speak up, organize, or protest in solidarity against systemic racism (Anand & Hsu, 2020). Despite a decorated history of participation

in the struggle for social justice (Aguirre & Lio, 2008; Fujikane, 2005; Maeda, 2012) among Asian Americans, and to some extent Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and Desi Americans, a populace of potential advocates for social change grappled with racism and engaged civically, perhaps for the first time. Deeply influenced and emboldened by the Black Lives Matter movement, a collective consciousness was raised within these communities, increasing the propensity for civic engagement, and restoring the dynamic power of social justice movements involving underrepresented people of color.

Identifying racially and politically as Asian Americans and serving as Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) practitioners and researchers, we have longed for this rise in consciousness and engagement as we strive to achieve these outcomes through AANAPISI programs, services, and research. Though previous research has found Asian American students more likely than the general population to be civically engaged (Park et al., 2009), we remain critical as contemporary trends bring little clarity concerning the civic behavior (Lin, 2020) of the diverse student populations we serve at AANAPISIs. Moreover, it is common at the onset of meeting first-year students onboarding into our programs to exhibit low levels of civic participation or agency regarding their ability to make a difference in the world. Consequently, these patterns implicate the tendency to stay silent or complicit toward injustice (Armony, 2004), thus perpetuating the racialized notions that deem our communities unharmed by systemic oppression (Yi et al., 2020).

To break these patterns and mischaracterizations, historically underserved Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, and Desi American (APIDA) college students, often overlooked as participants in social justice movements (Museus, 2021), are given access at AANAPISIs to education that promote their civic engagement. While we have observed many higher education institutions declaring to spearhead critical work to combat systemic oppression and promote a democratic society, we argue and support the educational research and scholarship that attests AANAPISIs are well positioned toward these endeavors, serving as critical sites for APIDA student engagement and activism toward systemic change and transformation (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Gutierrez & Le, 2018; Museus et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2019; Wang et al., 2021).

Inspired by the resurgence of racial justice movements and the prospects of American higher education institutions' potential

to advance the objectives of such movements, this chapter focuses on the emerging phenomenon of AANAPISIs efforts in cultivating Asian American college students' civic engagement toward social justice agendas. Notably, while our programs are designed to serve students from Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, and Desi American backgrounds, much of our practice is influenced by research and scholarship substantively focused on Asian American students. Not to mention a corresponding Asian American student majority enrolling at AANAPISIs in California. Although we aspire to offer insights on all APIDA students AANAPISIs are called to serve, we refrain from taking part in the widespread overgeneralization of these student populations as a monolithic racial group (Yi et al., 2020). As such, we explicitly note the Asian American students we address as *our students* throughout the chapter involve predominant populations of East and Southeast Asian students.

In striving to understand the role of colleges and universities to promote APIDA students' civic engagement amid a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes alongside the continuum of systemic violence against the Black community, educational research and scholarship as well as our personal reflections are integrated throughout the chapter. AANAPISIs at Sacramento State and Coastline College will be discussed to examine how these programs are accomplishing these endeavors. The following section offers a brief overview of the significance of AANAPISIs, along with a summary of salient challenges that complicate the success of our work. We then highlight our programs and the student populations we serve, as well as discuss our practices that develop students' social identities and critical consciousness to promote their civic participation. The remaining sections provide an overview of an ethnic studies framework we utilize within our practice and conclude with a call to action to institutionally prioritize our programs, ensuring the inclusion and involvement of APIDA students toward social justice agendas.

## **BACKGROUND**

Recent research on AANAPISIs highlight these institutions are advancing higher education inclusion and equity efforts by providing culturally relevant and responsive education to a large proportion of underrepresented first-generation APIDA college students (Museus et al., 2018; Nguyen M. H. et al., 2020). As one of the few institutions in the nation that center the racial and ethnic experiences of APIDA students through various academic and cocurricular programs (Conrad &

Gasman, 2015; Maramba & Fong, 2020), AANAPISIs are transforming and uplifting new generations of underrepresented APIDA students by cultivating their social identities and critical awareness while promoting their civic engagement. Given that the lack of data disaggregation by ethnicity (Grim et al., 2019) and racial stereotypes like the model minority (Lee, 2006), continue to mischaracterize APIDA students as high achieving (Yi et al., 2020) or uninvolved in nonacademic activities (Park et al., 2009), AANAPISIs leadership in responding to APIDA students' vast experiences and unique needs cannot be understated. For over a decade these programs have demonstrated the necessary care, sophistication, and innovation to truly serve one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented student populations in the nation (Teranishi & Kim, 2017).

While federal funding for AANAPISIs can promote a myriad of benefits to home institutions (Museus et al., 2018), there are notable challenges that impede the success of our efforts as practitioners. Despite the presence of committed campus community members who support and advocate for our students, AANAPISI programs are often at odds within home institutions, given that many are adjusting to serving a rapidly growing APIDA student population or mitigating traditional programs and practices designed exclusively to serve a traditional white-majority student body (Mac et al., 2019). As practitioners, we internalize and negotiate the preservation of these color-evasive structures and practices (Buenavista, 2021) while engaging with a variety of departments, campus partners, and stakeholders. Through this politicized process, countless interactions often lead us to question the legitimacy of our work as many demonstrate an inability or resistance to acknowledge the injustice and inequity our students and community face. Further, prevalent racialized misconceptions ongoingly emerge when our students are mistaken as foreigners or when our programs are associated with international student services. For these reasons and many more, our efforts that go beyond student retention and completion, such as promoting APIDA students' civic engagement, remain a formidable challenge.

## **OUR PROGRAMS AND STUDENTS**

The success of our AANAPISI programs at Sacramento State and Coastline College has been possible due to the utilization of research-based approaches, data-informed practices, and cross-campus collaboration in program development, planning, implementation, and

evaluation (Maramba & Fong, 2020). Our distinct accomplishments in cultivating our students' civic engagement have been more so due to the blending of academic and cocurricular interventions responsive to our students' vast experiences and backgrounds (Fabionar, 2020), as well as frameworks that align with social justice agendas. Examples of these efforts at both institutions include courses, workshops, and speaker series that emphasize racial and ethnic identity development, cross-campus and community-based partnerships with programs focused on leadership and service, as well as student and community organizations connected to local community issues or social movements. All together, these efforts are strategically semester-based or yearlong to ensure the cultivation of our students' sense of belonging within and beyond our campus community.

The Full Circle Project (FCP) excels in these endeavors through a cohort model, onboarding about one hundred students per academic year. For close to a decade, this model has immersed our students in a highly diverse APIDA community throughout their undergraduate career, with a rigorous two-semester learning community program that requires enrollment into ethnic studies courses during their first year. By their second year and beyond, FCP students are offered mentorship and leadership development programs, off-campus community-based opportunities and internships, as well as engagement in student-led campus-wide programs during APIDA heritage month and graduation seasons. A substantial population of students who identify as Hmong and Filipino engage in FCP, with subgroups self-identifying as Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Laotian, Cambodian, IU Mien, Japanese, Korean, and Pacific Islanders. While a handful of FCP students are from northern and southern parts of the state, the majority are homegrown locals who continue to live with family until they graduate.

The Intercultural Resource Center (IRC) at Coastline College accomplished these efforts in distinct, yet similar ways. While the institution recently concluded their five-year AANAPISI program during summer of 2020, the IRC was exceptional in supporting APIDA students serving a high average of 200 students per semester through cocurricular workshops and field trips, mentorship and leadership development programs, community-based activities, and internships, as well as student-led campus-wide ceremonies and regional conferences. With many students aiming to transfer to four-year institutions toward degree completion, a smaller cohort of students regularly

engaged at the center with many benefiting from programs offered between classes. Much of the center's success was achieved through a robust and integrated semester-based mentorship program, in which students experienced holistic support, peer-to-peer connection, and an outlet for academic, career, and identity exploration. The majority of students that engaged with the IRC were from surrounding cities who also lived at home while enrolled at Coastline. A significant student population who self-identified as Vietnamese was served at the IRC, followed by Filipinos. Subgroups of Cambodian, Laotian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students were also served along with a handful of Latinx and Black students who engaged in IRC offerings inclusive to all students of color.

Notably, both institutions serve a significant population of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students (Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, IU Mein) from refugee backgrounds. This means the SEAA students we serve are likely to be part of families who resettled in the United States due to displacement from war-torn countries (Yi et al., 2020). Like many students enrolled at AANAPISIs, SEAA students typically arrive on campus as first-generation college students from modest to low-income backgrounds with an array of responsibilities, including holding multiple jobs or serving as caretakers to younger and senior relatives (Fabionar, 2020). What is most unique about SEAA students in comparison to their APIDA peers are their polarizing educational experiences often caused by misconceptions that simultaneously characterized them as problem-free model minorities and deviant minorities unworthy of support (Museus, 2013). Altogether, the contentious racialized narratives of APIDA communities (Lin, 2020; Mac et al., 2019) and the significant diversity of student populations we serve at AANAPISIs like SEAA students, has undoubtedly complicated the legitimacy of our work and design of our programs. Nonetheless, our students' remarkable and varied backgrounds have more importantly revealed institutional deficits and service gaps that must be addressed and resolved to ensure our students' academic success and civic endeavors are actualized at our campuses.

## **PROMOTING STUDENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Substantive educational research on AANAPISIs have highlighted these institutions as effective in promoting APIDA students' civic engagement by creating pathways for students to build relationships

within their community. Recent analysis found AANAPISI programs achieve these outcomes by facilitating APIDA students' positive self-concept and sense of belonging (Nguyen M. H. et al., 2020), while connecting their learning experiences and service projects to larger social issues impacting the surrounding communities (Museus et al., 2018). Similarly, a study on AANAPISIs capacity to cultivate civic leaders found exposure to transformative approaches in curriculum, pedagogy, and research projects encouraged student engagement in their communities while developing competencies to participate in social justice agendas (Nguyen, 2019). Various cocurricular learning experiences through leadership, mentorship, and community-based opportunities connecting students to local and national advocacy organizations were also found to be effective in promoting civic engagement outcomes and bridging students' educational experiences to their own communities and other marginalized groups (Nguyen M. H. et al., 2020).

Given the historical marginalization APIDA students have endured in educational environments (Yi et al., 2020), cultivating social justice-oriented ways of knowing, seeing, and being (Yee, 2009) while developing students' confidence in themselves and their ability to engage in transformational leadership (Kodama & Dugan, 2019) has been critical toward demystifying their civic potential. Research in promoting the civic behavior of minoritized college students often highlights the significance of developing their social identities (Chan, 2017; Manzano et al., 2017) and critical consciousness to generate meaningful participation in social justice agendas (Museus, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Similarly, research focused on ethnic studies courses integrated in AANAPISI programs also highlight student identity and critical consciousness development empower students to believe they are capable of changing oppressive conditions that affect their community and other marginalized groups (Wang et al., 2021).

While there is much to consider, the culmination of AANAPISI programs and practices must be evolving and expansive to align with the growing complexity and diversity of student populations served at AANAPISIs (Teranishi, 2010). In doing so, practitioners must cultivate their knowledge and capacity to incorporate the contemporary realities of APIDA students' intersecting identities of gender, faith, immigration status, among other attributes (Chan, 2017). The sophistication of these efforts alone may determine how effective practitioners will be in developing APIDA students' social identities and critical consciousness to advance their civic and political aspirations.



### Full Circle Project

In pursuit of these endeavors, as noted the FCP requires their students to enroll in an ethnic studies first-year seminar and an introduction to Asian American studies course during their first semester. Through these courses, students are given various opportunities to reflect on who they are, what they hope to accomplish, and how to utilize campus and community resources to achieve their academic goals. These opportunities range from online writing assignments, online discussion forums, as well as in-person workshops and on-campus events. Foundationally based on the legacy of student activism and community organizing, the course offers a curriculum where students can explore topics of diversity, equality, knowledge production, power, and representation. The course also provides students reflective tools to promote dialogue regarding the university's role in society, navigating institutions to advance an agenda, building community to promote self-determination, and forming coalitions to affect change (Fabionar, 2020).

During their second semester, FCP students are given an opportunity to build upon this learning through an interdisciplinary studies course that is focused on contemporary issues and centered on community-based social change projects. The course focus on social change introduces students to the connection between theory and practice by exploring strategies for change through research, followed by presenting, planning, and implementing a social change project, as well as submitting an application to receive funding for their project (ibid.).

To set our students up for success, throughout these courses students are encouraged to reflect and connect their lived experiences to create projects that are meaningful and responsive to their family, community, and surrounding neighborhoods. The course is a blending of service-learning and ethnic studies designed to be learner-centered and student-led to position students as active participants in their campus and community at large. Examples of these interventions include on-campus community forums based on the students' chosen social issue, and workshop series focused on students' social identities, mental health and wellness, storytelling and healing, community organizing, as well as careers in entrepreneurship. The diversity of interventions is intended to provide students holistic opportunities to engage outside of the classroom.

## Intercultural Resource Center

Differing in design and structure as well as responding to the absence of ethnic studies courses, the IRC promoted students' identity development and critical consciousness through a weekly workshop curriculum and semester-based mentorship and leadership programs. These efforts emphasized the power of storytelling and self-knowledge regarding social identities and historical background, and were organized in the areas of diversity, advocacy, narrative building, goal setting, community organizing, critical consciousness, and wellness.

Like FCP students, IRC students were given opportunities to explore immediate issues their communities were facing, and the student-led actions that can contribute to helping their community resolve such issues. Majority of IRC interventions were dialogue-centered to offer students a space to explore and examine their goals, environment, and community that would contribute toward developing a sense of academic empowerment. These activities were offered in the form of workshops and mentorship sessions that gave students the space and connection to reflect on their social identities while learning about their peers' similar or unique journeys. Particularly in mentorship, students were offered a variety of tools to develop skills in academic planning, goal setting, relationship building with professors and campus departments, navigating the institution, and assessing their academic and personal goals. Through these interventions, students were also given opportunities to cultivate critical thinking skills while practicing the power of reflection. What IRC students found most valuable were the opportunities to share their personal stories encompassing their family, heritage, and social identities.

Much of these efforts were orchestrated to prepare IRC students to lead and facilitate these same conversations amongst their peers in workshops or conferences. IRC students were tasked to develop, plan, coordinate, and evaluate an annual leadership summit, to which all college students enrolled in southern California institutions were invited. Majority of workshops featured at the summit involved students of color issues concerning imposter syndrome, academic failure, stress relief, navigating online classes, and their intersecting social identities. Community-based organizations were also invited and engaged throughout this summit, serving as an event where students and leaders of the surrounding community can begin to cultivate meaningful relationships.

## Community Involvement

The aforementioned courses and programs at both AANAPISIs have been found to yield far-reaching outcomes as current and former students demonstrate active civic and political engagement in their local communities. Embodying the critical learning they experienced through AANAPISI programs, despite a global pandemic, the APIDA students and alumni of both programs continue to pursue and hold various roles in local, regional, and national organizations connected to social and racial justice agendas. Examples of these roles include volunteering, interning, employment, or serving as board members in ethnic-based or panethnic organizations like VietRise Orange County, IU Mien Community Services, Hmong Innovating Politics, Philippine National Day Association, Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance, and AAPIs for Civic Empowerment. Through these organizations, APIDA students participated in projects ranging from planning small-scale local leadership and educational youth conferences to nationwide campaigns like outreaching to underrepresented APIDA communities to complete the recent U.S. Census.

## ETHNIC STUDIES FRAMEWORK

Apart from academic degrees in education and years of service at AANAPISIs, the success of our efforts toward these endeavors could not be possible without utilizing a framework deeply influenced by ethnic studies. While we have reaped the benefits of education, mentorship, and experiences that cultivate the lens and tools to participate as institutional agents of change, we are aware of how easily susceptible any practitioner may be to upholding ideologies, structures, and practices that prevent or contradict the mission of AANAPISIs, as well as social justice agendas we strive for our students and communities to engage in.

As AANAPISI practitioners, we have found that developing a foundation based on what Tintiangco-Cubales and colleagues (2015) describe as a pedagogical approach that is contextual, culturally relevant, and community-responsive promotes our prime capacity to serve the diverse APIDA student populations at AANAPISIs. Through this framework, access, relevance, and community (ARC) are identified as the three pillars of the discipline which refine our understanding and utility of the framework. The ARC of ethnic studies enables us to provide students an education that empowers them to critically engage in, with, and for the marginalized communities or groups to which

they identify. This level of access is critical as many of our students have expressed no prior engagement to curriculum and programs we offer at AANAPISIs. Regarding the pillars of relevance and community, this is embodied through our interventions that involve faculty, staff, students, and community members through dialogue-centered activities. Coconstruction of knowledge through these activities has been imperative as students explore, examine, and build on unspoken and intersecting individual narratives as well as the histories of their family and community.

As we build upon the ARC, we strive to transform offices, classrooms, and centers critical spaces ensuring our students develop a sense of leadership and activism toward social change. By virtue of this framework, student empowerment is emphasized as we highlight the Third World Liberation Front, the prolific student organization who fought against institutional racial injustice and inequity by ensuring an ethnic studies education would be available for generations of college students across communities of color (Fujikane, 2005). This historical framing brings forth the significance of student-led projects we engaged APIDA students and their potential to be social change agents within and beyond our campuses.

At the onset of our AANAPISI careers, we learn early on to embody the lessons we teach our students. As our work remains contentious, we are called to be strong advocates, tasked to resist or refute color evasive ideologies that exclude our students from institutional inclusion or equity efforts. Notably, this framework helps us negotiate a politicized existence that is often overlooked or undervalued. Simultaneously, we are tasked to build partnerships amongst our equity identity-specific programs and support services that target historically underserved students of color. As we aim to strengthen cross-campus partnerships that may promote the institutionalization of our programs, this framework has been critical in modeling the necessary courage to engage in unwelcoming volatile spaces, while understanding and framing the racialized climate at AANAPISIs that prevent institutionalization or long-term institutional support.

## **CONCLUSION**

Though abating cases and deaths have moved the country to a less dramatic season, far-reaching consequences continue to manifest at our institutions as we adjust and bounce back from the social, economic, and institutional upheavals generated by the global pandemic.

During the time this manuscript was written, various parts of our campuses remain physically inaccessible, as multiple academic, programmatic, and service offerings continue to be in limbo among virtual, hybrid, and fully in-person. While it is unclear which changes will be short or long term, it is evident the institutional structures and practices we have worked so hard to develop or strengthen may not be corresponding to the contemporary lives and intersecting identities of students experiencing multiple hardships that have resulted from the pandemic.

As we recover from the brutal realities of anti-Asian hate crimes and violence against the Black community that emerged during the global pandemic, our AANAPISI community continues to grapple with the significance of our programs as our APIDA students' civic participation becomes more necessary. While we value the institutional promise toward increased commitment and support in response to the surge of anti-Asian racism hate crimes, AANAPISIs designed to respond to these community issues and address the injustice APIDA activist and advocates are striving to eradicate, remain disproportionately underfunded in comparison to other minority-serving institutions (Nguyen M. H. et al., 2020). Considering this inequity is at the federal level, we support the demands of Nguyen and colleagues (2020), who argue policy makers, practitioners, and researchers must advance their efforts to strengthen AANAPISI programs for the next generation of APIDA students. We further highlight the potential and power of developing workshops and campus events that promote social identity development, critical consciousness, and civic engagement despite the absence of ethnic studies courses or an AANAPISI federal grant. Collaborating with other equity-focused or service-learning campus departments and programs also have much to offer in relation to student civic engagement toward social justice agendas. Furthermore, as institutions prepare to reopen and respond to APIDA students contemporary lives, a recent educational report on anti-Asian racism and exclusion in higher education, Gutierrez and colleagues (2021, p. 6) highlight the following recommendations to specifically combat anti-Asian racism at higher education institutions:

1. Go beyond listening spaces [and] create a task force to think strategically about responding to racism and xenophobia towards Asian and Asian American students.
2. Increase the funding for Asian American Studies Departments, Programs, and Centers, alongside other ethnic studies areas, in

addition to providing funding for faculty and doctoral students who are conducting interdisciplinary research that works toward dismantling anti-Asian racism.

3. Collect and report disaggregated data on the diverse subgroups of Asian and Asian American students.

Representing the legacy of Asian American activism, ethnic studies education, and the APIDA advocates responsible for the establishment of AANAPISIs, as colleagues who crossed paths through AANAPISI programs, our collaboration for this chapter has been incredibly meaningful. Even more so, as we remain in an era where our students and communities continue to be excluded, alienated, misrepresented, or overlooked despite the recent attention to the racism, violence, and discrimination APIDA communities faced throughout the pandemic. In writing this manuscript, we aspired to combine our experiences as practitioners, as members of the APIDA community, and alum of an AANAPISI program, the FCP. Notably, we attest our lives have been transformed by this work, most importantly by our students' own transformation. Though the pandemic has illuminated much more work is needed to support APIDA students, we are hopeful this chapter contributes to further understanding the challenges and possibilities of serving underrepresented APIDA students and their civic potential toward social justice agendas.

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