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ABSTRACT

Priorities for Asian American Studies (AAS) programs for the future are discussed, along with the early history of these programs, changes they have undergone, and four impacts of the programs. Major impacts include: increased ethnic consciousness of Asian American students, increased sensitivity of colleges to Asian American curriculum and student services needs, positive support for Asian American community organizations, and research dealing with Asian Americans. Four concerns that are future priorities are as follows: (1) the need to redesign courses/curricula to better accommodate the needs, interests, and backgrounds of immigrant generation Chinese, Pilipino, Korean, Indochinese, and Asian Indian students; (2) the need to create a strong organizational network of AAS programs to exchange ideas on management, curriculum development, research, and responses to college financial cutbacks; (3) the need to develop new theoretical concepts and to explore new research topics, including the characteristics, communities, and problems of recent Asian immigrants; and (4) the need for AAS programs to closely reexamine their relations with Asian American communities. Seven additional priorities that might be addressed by AAS programs in the future are identified. The scope of a 1985 research project on AAS programs is briefly described. A four-page bibliography concludes the document. (SW)

Future Priorities for Asian American Studies Programs

by

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Future Priorities for Asian American Studies Programs

Introduction

Nearly two decades have passed since the emergence of the first Asian American studies (AAS) programs in the late 1960's. During this period, a small but significant body of writing on AAS programs has been produced which examines the characteristics and problems of these programs and their relationship to the more general Asian American movement (see for example the items in the bibliography). While this literature provides important insights into the development and nature of AAS programs, it has three main limitations. First, much of this work is based on observations of, participation in, and/or research (in a broad sense) on single AAS programs, although there are important exceptions. Second, much of this literature tends to be descriptive rather than analytic in nature. Third, there have been few recent attempts to make general assessments of AAS programs by looking at both their current status and their histories.

In order to address these limitations, a research project on AAS programs was undertaken in 1985[1]. In this project, over fifty faculty, staff, and student leaders connected with over twenty AAS programs were interviewed. Because of limited research funds, most of these AAS programs were located on the West Coast, though individuals associated with other programs were interviewed. This research also included an investigation of AAS program reports and internal programatic data, AAS program research, institutional review/evaluation materials, and newsletters. This project incorporated data and materials collected in 1971-72 research on AAS programs (Endo, 1973), previous writings on AAS programs, and observations based on personal participation in several AAS programs. The 1985 research project was a qualitative study rather than a quantiative survey of AAS programs, and its basic orientation--unlike that of much previous work--was to be broadly analytic rather than simply describe the characteristics and histories of individual programs. Special efforts were made to gather data on a number of specific issues, including:

1. AAS program goals and audiences
2. AAS program resources
3. Curriculum development
4. Curriculum materials
5. Changing course enrollments
6. Internal governance of AAS programs

7. Administrative status of AAS programs
8. College/university constraints and cutbacks in AAS programs
9. Institutionalization of AAS programs
10. AAS program research and creative activity
11. AAS program faculty development
12. Relations between AAS programs and Asian American communities
13. Student input into AAS programs
14. Relations between AAS programs
15. Development of AAS as an academic field
16. Impacts of AAS programs

17. Changes in the general sentiments which characterize AAS programs. This involves an inquiry into the idea that AAS programs in the late 1960's and early 1970's, when compared to the present, could be characterized as exhibiting a greater sense of energy, optimism, challenge, and conviction and as having a greater willingness to make sacrifices and take risks. Programs today, by contrast, might be characterized as exhibiting a greater sense of caution, of being in a holding pattern.

18. Changing perspectives on Asian Americans and their effect on AAS programs. For example, one general view of Asian Americans sees them as American minority groups and emphasizes their experiences in this country. This view also stresses the cultural and historical commonalities of Asian American groups (e.g. values, labor history, exclusion). This point of view is being altered in part because of: a) the post-1965 influx of Asian immigrants from many cultural and economic backgrounds who often retain a strong sense of national identity and may be greatly influenced by events in their home countries, b) a greater interest by researchers in the causes of Asian emigration to the U.S. and in links between Asian American and Asian history and culture, and c) a greater emphasis by researchers on examining Asian Americans within in a world social, economic, and political context.

The major findings of the 1985 research project are described elsewhere (Endo and Wei, 1986). This paper will make use of that work to discuss future priorities for AAS programs after first overviewing some of their characteristics.

Before continuing on, several cautionary points need to be made. AAS programs are highly diverse and it is therefore difficult to make general observations about them.

Generalizations will of course be made, but the reader should bear in mind that there are almost always exceptions. In addition, these observations will be most applicable to AAS programs on the West Coast, and they will not necessarily be relevant for AAS programs at commmunity colleges or community-based studies programs like the Asian American Resource Workshop in Boston. Lastly, the points and ideas presented here are meant to apply primarily to AAS programs which are institutionally-recognized in some fashion as relatively distinct and at least semi-permanent academic units in contrast to situations where one or a few AAS courses may be offered on an occasional basis within a "conventional" academic department (e.g. sociology, history, or psychology), general/experimental/residential studies programs, or special extradepartmental arrangements under the sponsorship of a liberal arts school/college or student services program.

Early History

The histories of AAS programs are complex and difficult to characterize, but there are some overall patterns. Briefly, the first programs were the result of the Third World Strikes at San Francisco State University and the University of California-Berkeley in 1968-69. By the early 1970's, scores of AAS programs or individual AAS courses were created, especially at schools in California, but at colleges/universities throughout the country. On most campuses, AAS programs were created in response to pressures by Asian American students and Asian American community groups. Typically, these pressures led to the initiation of experimental courses taught by undergraduate and graduate students, community leaders, and/or existing college/university faculty. The enthusiasm generated by these courses often stimulated the establishment of more extensive AAS programs. Most AAS programs were small but distinct units within the framework of conventional academic departments or liberal arts schools/colleges. A few programs became large and more autonomous. For instance, the AAS programs at San Francisco State and Berkeley became part of a major ethnic studies college and department respectively; the program at University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) was organized as a research center. A few AAS programs offered bachelor's degrees in AAS or ethnic studies and others offered minors in AAS.

Almost all AAS programs experienced a plethora of early problems, notably: 1) shortages of faculty, staff, curriculum materials, money and other resources; 2) conflicts over internal governance between faculty, students, and community groups; and 3) innumerable other difficulties because colleges/universities frequently made only small and very tentative commitments to AAS programs. Analytically, it is possible to view a number of early

problems experienced by AAS programs in terms of two more basic problems. The first basic problem was whether and how to be accountable to very different audiences such as Asian American students, Asian Asian community groups, college/university administrators, and professional colleagues (both Asian Americans and others). These audiences usually had conflicting expectations and demands and AAS programs seldom if ever had enough resources to meet all of these.

A second basic problem has to do with AAS program goals. Most AAS programs have always had four characteristic goals but have experienced difficulties in prioritizing and implementing them. The first program goal falls under the rubric of educational reform. This goal emphasized the development and dissemination of new social and political perspectives and information/research on Asian Americans. This goal was essentially concerned with the legitimation of the study of Asian Americans from Asian American points of view and with correcting biases in existing knowledge. A second goal was related to the socialization of Asian American students. This goal involved increasing the ethnic consciousness and self-awareness of Asian American students. This goal further stressed the learning of ideas/skills for the critical analysis of American society. This goal could encourage students to become Asian American community activists or future professionals who would be committed to Asian American matters. A third goal of AAS programs was involvement in Asian American community organizations and activities. The objective here was to promote constructive social change and/or contribute to the enhancement and persistence of Asian American communities. This goal was also one way of ensuring that community issues were represented in the curricula of AAS programs. A fourth goal of AAS programs was the creation of new educational resources. These included curriculum materials as well as research and research-related products (reports, books, articles, etc.). To reiterate, most AAS programs have always had these four characteristic goals. Difficulties frequently arose in trying to prioritize and implement them.

Changes, Current Situation and Impacts

Over time, AAS programs have undergone numerous changes. Again, the diversity of programs makes it difficult to generalize, but there are a few main trends. The course enrollments of most AAS programs increased, then decreased, then modestly increased from the early 1970's to the mid-1980's; at present, the enrollments of most programs have stabilized. Nearly all AAS programs moved from a very early focus on identity and history into a variety of areas like community institutions and problems, politics, literature and other creative arts, and the status of

Asian American women. Over time, the characteristics of Asian American students have changed from an original predominance of native-born descendents of pre-1965 Asian immigrants (mostly Japanese and Chinese) to a high proportion of immigrant generation Chinese, Pilipino, Korean, Indochinese, and Asian Indians. In most AAS programs, the levels of programatic input by students have declined (the continuing activism of East Coast students with regard to AAS courses at some schools is one exception). The levels of involvement by AAS programs as programs in Asian American community groups and activities have been diminishing, though AAS faculty, staff, and students may still be heavily involved as individuals. Some colleges/universities have faced declining enrollments but increases in the numbers of Asian American students; these schools may therefore be eliminating educational programs at a time when there is a greater need for AAS programs. A majority of AAS programs have spent inordinate amounts of time and energy fighting administrative constraints and cutbacks. Finally, over time, many AAS programs have become more institutionalized. For example, many have accumulated a core of permanent faculty. Many have set, standard curricula and have integrated AAS courses into the overall structure of general education/distribution requirements. And, many AAS programs have a fairly permanent, recognized status as academic units on their respective campuses. This institutionalization process has positive as well as negative aspects which won't be examined here.

Today, over thirty colleges/universities across the nation have identifiable AAS programs or ethnic studies programs with large AAS components, and many more schools regularly offer AAS courses. The most visible programs are probably those at UCLA, Berkeley, University of California-Davis, University of Washington, University of Hawaii, City College of New York, and the California State University campuses at San Francisco, Long Beach, Sacramento, San Jose, and Los Angeles. The size of AAS programs varies widely. The largest with regard to course enrollments are at San Francisco State and Berkeley where over thirty courses are offered each academic year. UCLA offers somewhat fewer courses annually but has prominent research and publications programs. On the other hand, the typical AAS program today probably consists of a director, a few temporary/part-time instructors, one or two staff members--and offers about ten courses each year.

AAS programs have had many impacts although these are obviously difficult to measure in any concrete way. Four impacts will be described here. The first impact is the increased ethnic consciousness of Asian American students. AAS programs have provided Asian American students with a sense of their own histories and communities. For some, this has contributed to personal feelings of self-confidence and clearer notions of their

direction in life. This impact can have a multiplier effect when Asian American students go on to work in/with Asian American communities and/or engage in activities that support Asian American interests.

AAS programs have had some impact on colleges/universities. For instance, they have sometimes increased the sensitivity of institutions to Asian American curriculum and student services needs. In addition, AAS programs are sometimes seen as an institutional resource and as a political advocate which represents a certain faculty, student, and community constitutency. On the other hand, one should not overstate the impact of AAS programs on colleges/universities. AAS programs have had relatively less effect on nonAsian American students, and many institutions continue to ignore numerous Asian American faculty and student concerns, and some and are cutting-back on AAS programs.

The impact of AAS programs on Asian American communities was probably the greatest in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Then, AAS programs were at the very heart of the emerging Asian American movement, contributing a good deal of manpower, money, ideas, and technical skills to community organizations and activities. Asian American communities likewise had an impact on AAS programs. As will be discussed below in greater detail, relations between many AAS programs and Asian American communities have been diminishing since the mid-1970's.

Lastly, AAS programs have had some impact on research dealing with Asian Americans. They have helped to legitimate the investigation of the Asian American experience, and they have produced some significant pieces of historical and social science work. However, too little research on Asian Americans (by researchers in general) contributes seminal analyses or theoretical ideas and perhaps too much tends to be confined to narrow topics, provide only simple descriptions, use limited data sources, and/or rework old ideas.

Future Priorities

Given the diversity of AAS programs, it is possible to list literally dozens of concerns that should be addressed in the future. Many, however, are applicable to only a few AAS programs. In looking at AAS programs in general, four concerns should be seen as future priorities.

1. One priority is the need to redesign courses/curricula to better accomodate the needs, interests, and backgrounds of immigrant generation Chinese, Pilipino, Korean, Indochinese, and Asian Indian students. This is important because most

AAS programs have courses/curricula which date back to the early or mid-1970's that don't readily mesh with these students' needs, interests, and backgrounds. As is already known, these immigrant generation students come from a multitude of cultural and economic backgrounds. Many may be highly career-oriented and pursuing studies in business, engineering, or other scientific/technical fields. Some may have limited English-language skills and be facing serious individual and family difficulties in adjusting to American society. Finally, many of these students come from communities which are undergoing rapid changes and have serious social problems. Redesigned AAS courses/curricula will require new curriculum materials (these have never adequately kept pace with the development of AAS programs) including a basic text for introductory AAS courses which gives substantial attention to the characteristics and experiences of recent Asian immigrants.

2. A second priority is the need to create a strong organizational network of AAS programs. This could be done under the auspices of an existing professional organization like the Association for Asian American Studies. One reason this hasn't yet been accomplished has to do with the relative isolation of many AAS programs, which, in turn, is tied to several factors such as the preoccupation of each AAS program with its own situation and survival; past or present conflicts, differences, or rivalries between AAS programs or faculty; and the widespread perception that each AAS program is fairly unique which contributes to a lack of a sense of shared experience or shared responsiblity for AAS.

An organizational network of AAS programs could be a vehicle for exchanging ideas on program adminsitration, course/curriculum development, research, and responses to college/university constraints and cutbacks. It could additionally be a clearinghouse for assistance to new AAS programs and very small programs, particularly those outside the West Coast (which may help enhance the national base of AAS). A network might provide some support for individual Asian American researchers who are not affiliated with AAS programs; this support may be critical since these researchers often work in isolation and/or their work is not adequately recognized and supported by their own institutions or colleagues. And, a network could monitor relevant state and national education policies and agencies, serve as a national-level Asian American education advocate (along with the National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education), and quickly mobilize AAS programs if necessary in a legislative or other crisis situation.

3. In terms of research by AAS programs (and others), there

is a need to explore new topics (e.g. the characteristics, communities, and problems of recent Asian immigrants) and to develop new theoretical concepts and ideas. Further, there is a need to do more applied research, especially on important social policy areas (e.g. housing, health, employment, education, community development, immigration, politics, etc.) which could contribute, among other things, to the service activities and political/advocacy work of Asian American community groups.

On a related matter, AAS programs (individually and collectively) need to develop and support more Asian American researchers (e.g. graduate students, faculty, and visiting scholars). Preferably, these individuals could be broadly-trained so they are less wedded to disciplinary methods and theories and therefore be an advantageous position to make advances in research and theory on Asian Americans.

4. A fourth priority has to do with relations between AAS programs and Asian American communities. This subject tends to be seen exclusively as the involvement of AAS programs in Asian American community groups and activities (e.g. by developing/sponsoring or providing resources for community organizations and activities; conducting community classes, conferences, and workshops; serving as a resource center with educational materials, basic population data, and information on social policy questions; conducting research on the history, organizations, demographic characteristics, and needs/problems of Asian American communities; and serving as a source of technical assistance on matters like proposal writing, organizational development, leadership training, social service strategies, etc.). However, past history suggests that this is only half of the picture; relations between AAS programs and Asian American communities also encompass the involvement of Asian American community groups in AAS programs (e.g. through representatives who sit on AAS program boards/committees, teach courses, organize/participate in campus conferences and workshops, etc.).

At present, the involvement of Asian American community groups in AAS programs is at a minimal level in most cases in contrast to the late 1960's and early 1970's when representatives of Asian American community groups (who were often also students) were frequently instrumental in the planning and implementation of AAS programs. The involvement of most AAS programs as programs in Asian American community groups and activities, as mentioned earlier, has been diminishing though AAS faculty, staff, and students may be heavily involved as individuals. Where relations between campus and community groups do exist today, they are

frequently between Asian American student organizations (which may or may not be sponsored by AAS programs) and Asian American community organizations. Also, relations between AAS programs and Asian American community groups are usually revitalized when a wide array of Asian American organizations need to present a unified front in response to some pressing social or political issue.

The reasons behind this decline in relations between many AAS programs and Asian American communities are complicated. In some circumstances, Asian American community groups have developed to the point where they have sufficient resources of their own or access to other resources besides those of AAS programs. In some instances, input from AAS programs doesn't mesh with the needs or capabilities of Asian American community groups as when AAS program-generated data are not useful or community groups don't have the time to work with AAS program researchers or to provide AAS students with meaningful learning experiences. In some cases, the limited manpower and time available to AAS programs may preclude high levels of community involvement. The lack of input by Asian American community group representatives into many AAS programs may be due to their busy schedules, their minimal detailed knowledge of college/university affairs, or institutional and AAS program policies or practices which limit this input. Beyond the foregoing, relations between some AAS programs and Asian American community groups may be eroding because a mutual lack of understanding/appreciation of the work and circumstances of the other party and current or previous animosities and conflicts of a personal, political, or ideological nature.

A fourth priority is that AAS programs need to closely reexamine their relations with Asian American communities. This priority is not simply an argument for more involvement by AAS programs in Asian American community groups and activities and vice versa. It is based on the fact that some (but not all) AAS programs don't appear to be willing to deal with this matter in a open, constructive, and systematic manner. There are a number of potential ways to strength AAS program-Asian American community relations, but actual strategies will have to be situation-specific given the diversity of AAS programs and Asian American communities and the paucity of good structural models. Any actions will clearly have to be beneficial to the ongoing work of all concerned parties. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that anything will be done in some instances until AAS programs and Asian American community groups see one another as critical for their respective survival.

Besides the four priorities described above, there are numerous other concerns that could be addressed by AAS programs in the future. The following are among the more important of these.

1. Some AAS programs need to further develop or more clearly articulate their fundamental philosophies, goals, and/or general sense of purpose and direction, both for their own benefit and that of their many audiences.

2. In a similar vein, if Asian American studies is to be seen as an academic field (and there divergent views about this), it needs to be defined---or at a minimum, there has to some consensus about its characteristic elements among those who see themselves as a part of this enterprise.

3. Many AAS programs need to do long-range strategic planning in regard to college/university constraints and cutbacks. Some programs need to greatly increase their visibility on campus and their access to institutional sources of power in order to survive. Strategic planning should be accompanied by internally-generated program evaluations which include critical analyses of their strengths and weaknesses.

4. Some AAS programs could benefit by strengthening their relations with various units on their campuses such as other minority studies programs (if they are separate academic units), Asian studies programs, and student services which deal with Asian American and/or minority group students (e.g. educational opportunity programs, student affirmative action offices, counseling centers, etc.).

5. Most AAS programs need to create mechanisms to encourage the programatic input of students.

6. Some AAS programs need to rework areas of their curriculum (apart from those covered previously). For instance, the structure of courses in some programs is very haphazard, and a few programs need to update their requirements for AAS majors or minors.

7. Most AAS programs will need to continue to be concerned about maintaining or increasing course enrollments through course/curriculum changes, making AAS courses fulfill general distribution/education requirements, adopting flexible policies for scheduling classes, etc. For some programs, enrollment concerns may entail

attempts to increase the numbers of nonAsian American students without fundamentally altering existing courses/curricula.

Obviously it is difficult to speculate whether these or any other priorities and concerns are likely to be addressed in the near future. While some of the fervor of the late 1960's and early 1970's may be gone, there is still a lot of remaining energy that could be channeled in these directions. In addition, several present trends may contribute to this energy. First, recent activities by the Association for Asian American Studies may help to network many AAS programs and to confront certain problems like curriculum development and the need to increase publication opportunites for Asian American reserachers. Second, there is a renewed interest by researchers (both Asian Americans and others) in Asian Americans which has been partly stimulated by the post-1965 influx of Asian immigrants who often have different characteristics, communities, and needs/problems than other Asian Americans. AAS programs may be affected by this heightened research actitity. Finally, there are current efforts to initiate or develop AAS courses, programs, and research in a number of areas of the country. It is therefore possible to be cautiously optimistic that at least some of the priorities and concerns presented here will given attention---and consequently to be cautiously optomistic about the future of AAS programs.

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Footnotes

1. This research is part of a broader historical study of the Asian American movement being conducted by Russell Endo and William Wei.

2. The articles listed in this bibliography primarily deal with Asian American studies programs and not with scholarly work in the field of Asian American studies. For a good introduction to the latter, see: Wang, L. Ling-chi. "Asian American Studies," American Quarterly 33 (1981): 339-354. Also, the articles listed in this bibliography do not focus on the activities of Asian American student organizations, though such groups may have close working relations with Asian American studies programs. For an introduction to Asian American student activism, see the articles on this topic in East Wind, 2 (Fall-Winter 1983).