

**UCLA**

**AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community**

**Title**

Centering Student Voices: A Mixed-Method Study of Strengths and Challenges for Asian American Studies

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w69337d>

**Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 11(1-2)

**ISSN**

1545-0317

**Authors**

Lee, Matthew R.  
Chung, Jennifer Y.

**Publication Date**

2013

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Research Article

# Centering Student Voices: A Mixed-Method Study of Strengths and Challenges for Asian American Studies

Matthew R. Lee and Jennifer Y. Chung

## Abstract

This research study examines Asian American student perceptions of Asian American Studies courses from a large Midwestern university using survey data (n = 761) and in-depth interviews (n = 12). Student voices and perspectives are centered in order better understand strengths and challenges of Asian American Studies beyond identified institutional factors.

## Introduction

The field of Asian American Studies (AAS) is now more than forty years old, having come a long way since its birth from the 1968 San Francisco State and 1969 University of California Berkeley student strikes (Umemoto, 2000). In the 1990s, AAS experienced renewed growth in higher education beyond California's borders in part due to interest in multiculturalism, rising Asian American college student enrollments, and the maturation of ethnic studies (Chang, 1999). Several scholars have examined the challenges of building and institutionalizing the field, such as developing a robust curriculum and advancing the field without institutional and financial support and commitment for tenure-track faculty hiring (e.g., Chan, 2005; Chang, 1999; Endo and Wei, 1988). For example, in his examination of AAS in the 1990s, Chang (1999) identified several challenges to the field, including the appointment of non-tenured faculty as AAS program directors, externally imposed expectations without adequate budgetary support, faculty hiring constraints in joint searches with departments who have different visions, and weak coalitions with other communities. AAS programs without adequate autonomy, administrative staff support, budgets, and the ability to hire and tenure their faculty are hindered in their ability to meet student needs.

Chang's 1999 study focused on a private institution on the West Coast; however, every AAS program emerges from its own historical and sociopolitical context, with varying levels and forms of institutional support. AAS in the Midwest, for example, has challenges of incorporating regional, intellectual, geographic, and immigration histories (Lee, 2009). Established in 2000, the Asian American Studies Program (AASP) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is the largest of its kind in the Midwest. The program is fortunate having not experienced some of the administrative constraints identified by Chang. While institutional support is fundamental to the development of AAS programs, it is not the only factor. The focus of this study is to center students' perspectives in order to identify strengths and challenges for program building beyond institutional factors: Who is taking AAS courses? Why do students take these courses? Why not? This project takes a mixed-methods approach and provides demographic data on students taking AAS courses as well as student voices on how they experience and perceive these courses.

### Demographics of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

UIUC is a land-grant institution, established in 1867 as one of the original thirty-seven public land-grant institutions created by the Morrill Act of 1862. In the 2009-10 academic year, the total student population was 41,918. There were 31,209 undergraduates and 10,709 graduate and professional students; 53 percent were men, 47 percent women. Based on racial background, the campus was 75.73 percent white, 6 percent African American, 6 percent Latino/a, 12 percent Asian American, and 0.27 percent Native American. Based on nationality, 85 percent were U.S.-born and 15 percent international. According to the university's Division of Management and Information Fall 2010 statistics, there were 4,786 domestic Asian American students. While Asian Americans constituted 12 percent of the campus population in 2009, the Asian American population in the state of Illinois was only 4.4 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Asian Americans at the University of Illinois were therefore considered to be represented beyond their state numbers. Furthermore, Asian Americans were not counted as underrepresented racial minorities in minority campus services, such as the Office of Minority Student Affairs. Rather, Asian Amer-

ican student services emerged in a separate unit under the Office of the Dean of Students.

### Asian American Studies Program

In 1997, AAS at UIUC made national news when the provost appointed members to the then-Asian American Studies Committee (AASC) with the charge to fill six full-time equivalent (FTE) lines and create an ethnic studies program in three years. By the fall of 2000, the committee became the Asian American Studies Program under the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and had hired six core faculty. Since the late 1990s, the university's other ethnic studies programs (African American studies, Latina/o studies, and Native American studies), gender and women's studies, and Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society have also grown, offering a variety of courses, events, conferences, and research opportunities on minority populations. During the 2003-4 academic year, the AASP gained "enhanced rights" along with the other ethnic studies and gender studies units on campus, and since then has been able to make 100 percent faculty appointments and grant tenure. Additionally, the program has had stable financial support and three full-time staff administrators to oversee programming and management.

A key aspect in the development of UIUC's AASP has involved faculty hiring. The university conducted a national senior-level director search, filled in 2002 by Dr. Kent Ono. Since the hire of the first six faculty, the AASP has continued to conduct faculty searches. Currently, there are fourteen core faculty and eight affiliated faculty. The AAS curriculum has also rapidly developed since its inception; twenty-one AAS courses were offered in the fall of 2010 with a total of forty-one courses listed in the campus course catalogue. Dozens of students have graduated with an AAS minor since it was offered in 2002. A graduate minor was created in 2010. A proposal for an interdisciplinary undergraduate major in AAS was submitted in the fall of 2005 but was denied in 2007.

### Student Activism

The history of student activism for an AAS program at UIUC as well as for Asian American student services and a cultural center reaches back into the 1970s (Hayasaki, 1998). According to Dr. Ono, the program's director at the time, its development was unique in that UIUC had a "very strong core of Asian stud-

ies scholars whose students were really pushing them, . . . asking questions, expressing interest in—‘what about Asian Americans?’” Dr. Ono described the joint effort of students and faculty: “The students had been asking for something like this for quite a long time, off and on. . . . But then it was just over time, faculty, who are people who stay on a campus, who have their careers there, they see, over time, the continuing need for this.”

Students renewed their efforts in the 1990s, yielding the first AAS course offered in the 1992–3 academic year and a proposal for an Asian American Cultural Center submitted to UIUC administrators in 1994. Students received funds for Asian American programming and staff support through the Office of the Dean of Students throughout the 1990s. In 2005, years of student and alumni activism was fulfilled in the grand opening of a new Asian American Cultural Center, a 6,800-square-foot building physically joined to the AAS building.

### Library Resources

Administrators set aside funds to develop AAS library resources in 1997, in conjunction with the formation of the AASC, acknowledging that academic program building and student and faculty research require substantial library resources. In August 2005, a comprehensive AASC report sent to the Office of the Provost recommended the centralization of acquisitions and expertise under the auspices of the library, acquiring more than three hundred additional books and fifteen journals, the creation of a virtual library with an online database of searchable AAS materials, a physical library space such as a reading room to house materials, and most importantly the creation of an AAS librarian position. The proposal was rejected, with no staff or increases of library expenses on behalf of AAS anticipated.

### Method and Participants

An exploratory campuswide survey conducted at UIUC in the spring of 2003 gathered Asian American students’ assessments of a wide range of issues including academic resources. Interviews with undergraduate and graduate student leaders of campus organizations further explain and contextualize experiences of AAS at this site. At the beginning of data collection, the AASP was offering an average of ten courses a semester, had held at least one

national conference or meeting a year, and had seven faculty with FTEs in the program and two full-time staff. Course enrollments were steady, with lower-division introductory courses filling to maximum capacity. The AAS minor was about a year old. The total campus student population in the spring of 2003 was 36,318 (26,687 undergraduates and 9,631 graduate and professional students), with Asian American students approximately representing 11 percent of the overall campus total.

The term *Asian American* is primarily used here to denote individuals of Asian descent in the United States (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asian groups) who have been racialized and grouped as “Asian” in policy and legislation; however, all surveyed students self-identified as Asian American. The term *Asian Pacific American* was purposefully not used in this study to avoid referring to Pacific Islander groups, who have distinct histories and who are marginalized by this conflation (Diaz, 2004).

### Survey Data

In October 2002, the chancellor and vice chancellor for Student Affairs appointed the Ad Hoc Committee (AHC) on Asian Pacific American Campus Life to examine the quality of campus life for Asian American students. Members of this committee included six undergraduate students, one graduate student, one visiting scholar, one faculty member, and eight academic professionals consisting of staff from the Office of the Dean of Students, Counseling Center, Illini (student) Union, and AASP. The committee was charged with assessing the personal, social, and academic needs of Asian American students and making recommendations for improvements. The committee conducted an English-language large-scale online survey to assess Asian American students’ needs and perceptions of the quality of their academic and extracurricular life at the university, including items about academics; perceptions of discrimination; perceptions of culturally appropriate resources; extracurricular and social activities; and interactions with the larger community. One major objective was to analyze students’ perceptions to determine if particular groups (e.g., by ethnicity, generation, or student status) differed in certain domains, and to generate action items to address areas that students identified as unsatisfactory. An examination of the data would provide a student-driven

assessment of Asian American academic resources on this campus and a detailed synopsis of the kinds of Asian American students that take courses related to their racial and ethnic identity (for more on the AHC, see Lee et al., 2009). The survey was sent to the Office of the Dean of Students to be translated into an html-format survey. A demographics section of the survey included items on generation status, ethnicity, year in school, student status, and participation in an Asian American student organization.

An AHC subcommittee developed the survey section examining student perceptions of AAS and curricular support for Asian American student interests. Items in this section were rated using a 5-point Likert-scale format (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree") and several open-ended items about why they took AAS courses and what their most influential course was at the university. Because the assessment focused on AAS courses and no such published measure exists for that particular subset of courses, items were developed from an understanding of campus dynamics by members of the subcommittee. In the absence of metric validation, the survey was reevaluated in an iterative fashion several times by the entire AHC to approve content, wording, and order of items. Reliability analysis of the academic section about AAS was  $\alpha = .71$ . In the 2003 spring semester, all self-identified Asian American students (according to the university's Division of Management and Information) over age eighteen were e-mailed to participate in the survey. Students who did not reply within two weeks received a second e-mail. Participants completed the survey via the Internet and had to enter their university identification number, which precluded them from participating more than once. Accessing the survey also required providing informed consent; continuing the survey constituted informed consent. Data were stored on a secure server with identifications removed so that responses were untraceable to the original respondents. The incentive to participate was entry into a random draw to win a \$50 bookstore gift certificate.

Planned analyses were conducted on ethnicity, generation status, academic major, and whether the respondent had taken AAS courses. Cross-ethnic analyses could not be performed because of small numbers of certain ethnicities, so respondents were categorized into Asian heritage groups using common regional groupings, allowing further examination of intergroup differences. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese descent respondents

were classified as East Asian American (EAA). Indian, Pakistani, Nepalese, and Sri Lankan descent students were classified as South Asian American (SAA). Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, Burmese, Malaysian, and Indonesian descent students were classified as Southeast Asian American (SEAA). Filipino Americans (FAs) were classified in their own category because not all self-identify as SEAA and, in some U.S. states, constitute a separate ethnic/racial category (Espiritu, 1992). Biracial and multiracial respondents were also entered into a separate category.

Generational analyses were based on first-generation Asian American status ("born in Asia and mostly influenced by Asian culture"), 1.5-generation status ("born in an Asian country, then immigrated to America before the age of eighteen, and grew up with exposure to American culture and their parents' heritage culture or cultures"), and second- and later-generation statuses. Later-generation respondents (i.e., third and fourth) were grouped with second-generation status because of low sample size.

The survey sample consisted of 761 students: 668 undergraduates (approximately 18% of the 3,614 Asian American undergraduates on campus) and 93 graduate and professional students (15% of the 624 Asian American graduate and professional students on campus). The overall response rate was 19 percent. The sample was 71.7 percent in-state, and 21.6 percent out-of-state (6.7% did not report residence). About one-fifth of the sample (17.6%) was involved in an Asian American student organization though only eight graduate students (8.6% of that subsample) reported such involvement. The overall survey response rate was consistent with other college student samples from a meta-analysis conducted by Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000). It was impossible to determine the demographics of nonrespondents because the demographic questions asked in this survey were not recorded by the university where the data were collected.

### **Ethnicity**

The largest ethnic groups on campus were Chinese, Indian, and Korean Americans (see Table 1). Categorization by heritage group revealed a sample that was 50.3 percent EAA ( $n = 383$ ), 20.8 percent SAA ( $n = 158$ ), 14.2 percent SEAA ( $n = 108$ ), 8.4 percent FA ( $n = 64$ ), and 7.2 percent ( $n = 55$ ) biethnic or biracial Asian American. Of the fifty-five biracial/multiracial respondents, twenty-six



were biethnic (e.g., “Korean/Japanese” or “Filipino/Chinese”), and twenty-nine were biracial Asian/white. Ethnicities recorded as “other” ( $n = 19$ ) were grouped along heritage categories; non-specific responses (e.g., “Asian,”  $n = 11$ ) were not analyzed. Except for a slight underproportional representation of SEAs, these percentages matched U.S. Census estimates for the distribution of Asian ethnicities in the state of Illinois (Reeves and Bennett, 2004).

### Generation Status

Nearly all of the students in the survey sample (89.9%) were

Table 1: Percentages of Participant Ethnicities  
by Student Status and Generation Status

Ethnic Group	Generation Status					n
	1st	1.5	2nd	3rd	4th	
Chinese	15.5	29.2	54.2	1.2	0	168
Filipino	7.8	25.0	67.2	0	0	64
Indian	8.7	17.4	73.9	0	0	138
Japanese	0	30.8	38.5	7.7	23.1	13
Korean	5.4	23.8	70.0	1.0	0	130
Laotian	0	50.0	50.0	0	0	4
Pakistani	7.1	21.4	71.4	0	0	14
Taiwanese	15.2	27.2	57.6	0	0	66
Thai	6.7	20.0	73.3	0	0	15
Vietnamese	23.8	23.8	52.4	0	0	21
Biracial/Multiracial	5.4	18.2	49.0	9.0	18.2	55
Other	5.2	26.3	42.0	10.1	5.2	19
Did not report						54
Student Status						
Undergraduate	10.2	23.5	63.0	1.6	1.6	616
Freshman	8.8	24.7	63.7	1.6	1.0	182
Sophomore	11.2	19.7	65.1	2.0	2.0	152
Junior	9.4	26.8	61.1	1.0	2.0	149
Senior	12.0	22.6	61.7	2.3	1.5	133
Graduate/professional	8.7	28.3	57.6	1.0	4.3	92
Did not report						53
TOTAL	9.3	22.5	58.1	1.4	1.8	761

first-, 1.5-, or second-generation Asian American, with approximately the same distribution among undergraduate and graduate students (see Table 1). There were eleven third-generation Asian American students (one was a graduate student) and fourteen fourth-generation students (four were graduate students).

### Area of Study

Respondents' academic majors are subsumed by fourteen colleges at the university. Most respondents were liberal arts and sciences majors (LAS;  $n = 254$ ) or engineering ( $n = 229$ ), compared to one student in library and information science, one in aviation, and three in veterinary medicine. Other common majors included the colleges of commerce and business administration (CBA;  $n = 106$ ); agricultural, consumer and environmental sciences (ACES;  $n = 28$ ); education ( $n = 22$ ); and fine and applied arts (FAA;  $n = 21$ ).

### Asian American Studies Student Profile

From the larger sample, a brief demographic summary of students who reported having taken an AAS course ( $n = 83$ ; 10.9%) was conducted. Seventy-three of the eighty-one undergraduates who reported taking an AAS course provided demographic data. This AAS subsample consisted of forty-five EAAs, ten FAs, seven SAAs, five SEAAs, and six biracial/biethnic Asian Americans. Only two graduate students reported taking an AAS course; however, among undergraduates, there were nineteen freshmen, thirteen sophomores, twenty-five juniors, and sixteen seniors. There were seven first-generation, twenty-two 1.5-generation, and forty-five later-generation students in the subsample. An additional nine students who reported having taken an AAS course did not report their generation status. Academic majors of AAS course-takers included forty from LAS, ten in engineering, eight CBA, five FAA, four ACES, three communications, two education, and one applied life studies major. Most of the sample, sixty-two (74.7%) had taken only one or two courses, compared to eight who had taken three to five courses, and four who had taken six or more.

### In-depth Interviews

In 2007, in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with twelve Asian American undergraduate and graduate student leaders of organizations. Interviewees were involved in both Asian

American student organizations and multicultural or “people of color” organizations and coalitions. There were nine female students and three male students. Of the nine women, five were undergraduates and four were graduate students; of the three men, one was an undergraduate and two were graduate students. Three of the undergraduate students were seniors, two were juniors, and one was a sophomore. Both graduate and undergraduate students were involved in their respective organizations to various degrees. Interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and were generally one and a half hours in length. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality, especially because the community of Asian American student leaders on campus was relatively small. Their voices help provide context to the 2003 survey data because most were students at UIUC at that time. In addition, an interview with Dr. Ono was conducted in 2011 in order to provide historical context for the development of AAS on campus.

## Results

The survey data provide a profile of students who take AAS courses, reasons for taking (or not taking) these courses, how students feel about resources for the program, and the value they give to AAS courses. The interviews with Asian American student leaders and Dr. Ono support the survey data by adding depth to the findings and also offering notable points of departure.

### Profile of Students Who Take Asian American Studies Courses

Based on the eighty-three undergraduates who reported having taken at least one AAS course, an analysis of variance was conducted to see if students from particular ethnic groupings were more likely to have taken AAS courses, yielding a marginally significant result ( $F_{(4,697)} = 2.29, p = .058$ ). Post-hoc analysis with the least significant differences procedure ( $p$ -value reset to  $.05/10 = .005$  to control for pairwise comparisons) showed that SAAs were less likely than EAs (mean difference =  $.076; p = .01$ ) or FAs (mean difference =  $.109; p = .016$ ) to have taken an AAS course. Generation level was not significantly associated with taking an AAS course ( $F_{(2,679)} = .643, p = .526$ ), nor other variables; to characterize the data, however, their average scores are reported (see Table 4).

## Reasons for Taking Asian American Studies Courses

Students who enrolled in at least one AAS course filled out a checklist of reasons for why. As Table 2 reveals, most AAS enrollees said the course applied to life or fulfilled a general requirement. Student-to-student recruitment also played a role in taking an AAS course: 50.7% heard it was a good course and 20.5% took a class with friends.

Table 2: Reasons for Taking or Not Taking an Asian American Studies Course

Undergraduates who had taken an AAS course (n = 73)

Personal interest/applied to life	76.7%
Fit into my schedule	61.6%
Heard it was a good course	50.7%
Major/minor requirement	33.3%
Fulfilled general requirement	32.9%
Friends were taking it	20.5%

Students who had not taken an AAS course

	Undergraduate (n = 500)	Graduate (n = 75)
Do not have the time	63.0%	36.0%
Did not know about such courses	31.0%	71.0%
Didn't fit requirement	29.6%	40.0%
Not interested	14.4%	28.0%
Desired courses not available	12.0%	8.0%

Dr. Ono described a shift in student culture as a factor to students taking AAS courses: "Students saw the value of the course load, and they told their friends, and it became a kind of cultural— . . . in a specific 'student culture'—kind of thing to do." He also noted this shift in student culture as student driven:

Now I do come to my classes, and they say, "My roommate recommended this course." And so you see it's basically a student advising issue. Students hear from other students that they like

the class or that they're majoring or that they're minoring [in AAS], and then they consider it, too. They think, "If my friend is going to do that, then it's something I should consider."

In this way, students act as advisors and advocates of the program.

### Reasons for Not Taking Asian American Studies Courses

Non-AAS course takers filled out a checklist providing reasons for why they did not take an AAS course. Most non-AAS takers reported not having enough time (63% of undergraduates, 36% of graduate students). Fewer students (14.4%) who did not take an AAS course said it was because they lacked interest. Table 2 results show that undergraduates cited lack of time as the largest barrier for taking an AAS course, whereas graduate students did not know such courses existed. When asked why they did not take an AAS course, 31 percent of undergraduates reported they did not know the AASP existed, compared to 71 percent of graduate students.

Only one student interviewed had never taken an AAS course. Kai, a SAA undergraduate student, was not able to take AAS courses because of lack of time, like 63 percent of survey respondents: "Because I changed my major so often, I was on a tight schedule so I couldn't take any [AAS courses]." However, he was planning to register for courses in the near future: "Next semester, actually, will be the first time I will be more open. So I actually want to take more classes then. Unfortunately for now, I'm trying to knock off requirements so I haven't had that opportunity."

John, the other SAA student in the interview sample, had completed his undergraduate degree and was in the process of applying to graduate programs. One of his mentors was a South Asian professor on campus:

His was the first Asian American Studies class I took. At that point, there was maybe one other class related to Asian American studies. Since then it's blossomed. I looked at the list of AAS classes. It blows my mind. . . . I'm impressed by how much it's changed and improved on campus. That being said, I don't have a very solid connection to the program.

At the time John was an undergraduate student, AAS was in its very beginning stages. Although he had an interest in the field, the lack of course offerings limited his engagement with the program while he was a student at UIUC. The time of survey data collection

in 2003 was only three years after the appointment of the initial six core faculty and one year after the national director search and creation of the AAS minor. The low number of students who had taken AAS courses (73 undergraduate students) reflects the impact of institutional constraints on course enrollment, as John had experienced when he was an undergraduate.

### Distinction between Taking Courses and Feeling Connected

Although more than half of undergraduates and graduate survey respondents knew about the AASP, they had different levels of investment and connection to the program. During the interviews, students made the distinction between taking courses and feeling connected to the program. Eleven of the twelve students interviewed had taken at least one course; however, most did not feel that the program was connected with undergraduate students. For example, Rose, a graduate student, believed that most students do not even know the program exists: "I think there are some Asian American students that are really connected to the studies program, but I'd say the vast majority are not. And I'm always surprised when I talk to an undergrad, and they've never heard that we have an Asian American Studies program."

The graduate students interviewed were personally and professionally invested in research that involved some aspect of AAS and as a result, felt a stronger connection to the program. The program offered financial and intellectual support, which Gina acknowledged: "For grad students, there's been a lot of support in terms of funding and money. They say there's a space for us to meet, and people to talk to and, like, faculty to talk to about our work. I think in general they're really supportive." This was particularly meaningful given a lack of such support by their "home" departments. For example, Steve commented, "I personally feel there's a disconnect with my own department so I think AAS has provided that space where I feel more connected to people and to the program." Dr. Ono also noted this as a trend on campus:

The recurring problem of everything that you hear is the graduate students come in departments already . . . such as English, Psychology, Communication . . . and they sometimes struggle in a different array of ways as the only Asian Americanist, sometimes the only Asian American. So I'm not sure that I've heard it articulated as a need, but I think that's why

they gravitate—the ones that do to Asian American Studies—that feeling of isolation, marginalization.

For those graduate students connected to the AASP, it provided much-needed support. Unfortunately, of the seventy-five graduate students surveyed who had not taken an AAS course, a majority did not know that AAS courses existed.

Assessment of Academic Resources

Evaluations of academic resources provided by undergraduates in the survey sample were analyzed (see Table 3). Because the scale midpoint was 3 out of 5, a mean of 3.19 (item 3) suggests students were only slightly in favor of saying there were enough academic resources and events for Asian Americans on campus. It seemed students were slightly dissatisfied (items 1 and 2) with campus and library resources for AAS.

Table 3: Undergraduates’ Evaluation of Asian American Academic Resources

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree or Strongly Disagree (%)
1. I feel that there are enough resources/courses/events related to AAS on this campus.	2.97	1.03	33.9	41.5
2. I have found library resources on this campus satisfactory for doing research on Asian and/or Asian American issues and studies.	2.97	.85	21.6	27.2
3. There are enough academic resources and services for Asian American students.	3.19	.91	36.5	23.2

Items scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree.”

Table 4 reveals the results from the planned post-hoc analyses conducted to see if students from different demographic backgrounds differed in their assessments of academic resources. Anal-

yses revealed that EAAs were significantly less likely, compared to SAAs or SEAs, to think there were enough AAS resources (item 1). EAAs were also significantly less likely than SAAs to think there were enough library research resources for AAS (item 2).

Table 4: Mean Ratings of Academic Resources Items by Heritage Group, Generation Level, and Enrollment<sup>a</sup>

Item	Heritage Group					Generation			Asian American Studies	
	EAA	SAA	SEAA	FA	BA	1st	1.5	2nd+	AAS	Non-AAS
1.	2.86a (1.00)	3.14b (1.01)	3.31b (1.09)	2.88 (1.15)	3.05 (.98)	2.91 (1.00)	2.87 (1.04)	2.95 (1.04)	2.69a (1.09)	3.01b (1.02)
2. <sup>b</sup>	2.85a (.88)	3.35b (.74)	2.96 (.48)	2.97 (.81)	2.91 (93)	3.02 (.74)	2.97 (.84)	3.00 (.88)	2.80a (1.01)	3.01b (.82)
3. <sup>b</sup>	3.15 (.93)	3.32 (.88)	3.18 (.81)	3.07 (.95)	3.31 (.87)	3.13 (.79)	3.14 (.94)	3.17 (.94)	2.85a (1.00)	3.32b (.89)

<sup>a</sup> Column headings: EAA = East Asian American; SAA = South Asian American; SEAA = Southeast Asian American; FA = Filipino American; BA = biracial or biethnic; 1st = Asia-born first-generation Asian Americans; 1.5 = Asian-born yet moved to the United States before the age of 12; 2nd+ = American-born and later-generation students; AAS = students who have taken at least one AAS course; Non-AAS = all students who never took an AAS course; AS = students who have taken at least one Asian studies course; Non-AS = all students who never took an Asian studies course. Values represent means (standard deviations) on a 5-point scale (5 = “strongly agree”; 1 = “strongly disagree”).

Means with different subscripts within a grouped column heading differ significantly from one another at  $p < .05$  for two groups,  $p < .017$  for three groups (.05 / 3 to control for pairwise error using the LSD procedure) and  $p < .005$  (.05 / 10 to control for pairwise error using the LSD procedure) for any two out of five groups. Means with the same or without subscripts do not differ significantly from one another.

<sup>b</sup> Group differences for AAS vs. non-AAS students significant at  $p < .09$  and  $.06$  for items 2 and 3, respectively.

Students who had taken at least one AAS course, compared to those who had not, were more likely to report that there were not enough AAS resources on campus (item 1), library resources (item 2; marginally significant), or general academic services for Asian American students (item 3). Although students surveyed noted a lack of resources for AAS on campus, Dr. Ono acknowl-



edged that AAS at UIUC was “lucky” to have the level of support it did to build the program:

I think that we were very, very, very lucky at Illinois to have the kind of funding . . . to be able to hire faculty and build the program [to] function. . . . We have a real budget here that allowed us to do programming; that allowed us to do things for students; and to create a community. . . . So in that sense, we were, in fact, incredibly lucky.

As the director of the program from 2002–7, Dr. Ono experienced firsthand the program’s unique history of institutional support; however, from the perspective of many students, there were not enough resources or academic services.

#### Correlation between Asian American Studies Course Enrollment and Curricular and Extracurricular Involvement

Selected variables in the survey data were submitted to a correlational analysis to observe patterns in student academics and to highlight areas where AAS might have impacted students’ experiences further. This analysis was performed to reveal larger patterns of relationships between variables that have been identified as potential factors that may be associated with taking AAS, such as enrollment in a LAS major or participation in an Asian American student organization.

The LAS major was selected for correlational analysis based on the AAS subsample profile and the fact that the AASP, while interdisciplinary, is housed in LAS. In the present sample, 237 students (38.3%) were LAS majors (dummy coded as 0 = “not LAS” and 1 = “LAS major”). Results revealed that taking at least one AAS course strongly correlated with being an LAS major ( $r = .13, p < .01$ ).

Participation in an Asian American student organization (dummy coded as 0 = “no”; 1 = “yes”) was also selected as a variable for correlational analysis due to research suggesting that it may have an instrumental effect on students’ identities, as might AAS courses (e.g., Kodama et al., 2002). The knowledge that AAS had an impact on a large proportion of students in the overall sample (see Best Courses section) compelled the researchers to include participation in student organizations as a variable. Results revealed that taking at least one AAS course strongly correlated with being involved in an Asian American student organization ( $r = .12, p < .01$ ). Interestingly,

being an LAS major did not correlate with involvement in an Asian American student organization ( $r = .03$ , *ns*).

As mentioned, eleven of the twelve students interviewed had taken at least one AAS course. These students were involved in Asian American student organizations, which complements the survey findings. However, being active in student organizations did not always indicate an investment in the AASP, which most students viewed as declaring a minor in AAS. Mara, a FA student, noted this disconnect: "It's interesting because when you see people who are AAS minors, they're not always APA [Asian Pacific American] leaders on campus who are involved in cultural and political stuff. Because I'm very involved but not a minor." This did not mean that student leaders did not value education. On the contrary, they viewed education as fundamental to their organizational involvement and activism and were engaged with education outside of classroom contexts (Chung, 2009).

### Best Courses

Survey respondents reported their "most influential" course taken at the university. Twenty-one students cited AAS courses and every one of these students were EAA ( $n = 17$ ), SEA ( $n = 2$ ), or FA ( $n = 2$ ). Moreover, the statistics revealed that of the seventy-three undergraduates who had taken an AAS course, nearly a third (28.7%), cited it as their most influential.

The students interviewed also evaluated their AAS courses positively. Tracey, an undergraduate, had taken three classes and described them as "really well-taught." Katherine, another undergraduate student, also took three classes and thought "they were great." Dr. Ono saw the value in connecting the academic program to student and community organizations: "I got here and tried to start that up, to kind of connect the curriculum to external agencies, groups, [and] organizations." He observed students' desire for the opportunity to make meaningful connections: "I think students are more or less thirsty for this kind of rich educational opportunity." However, he experienced institutional barriers to these efforts:

The university was very skittish about it [a course connecting AAS to community interactions] so we proposed the course three different times, and three different times we failed. It was a course that was about Asian American Studies and applied learning in which the students had to do an internship

as well as do the course content. The curriculum committee . . . did not like that. And we could never convince them of the . . . utility or the kind of intellectual use for that course.

While the survey findings reveal that the AASP is making a positive impact on students' lives, Dr. Ono's comments demonstrate the program's desire to provide a rich and relevant educational experience for students—and the work it takes to challenge institutional curricular norms.

### Discussion and Policy Implications

This mixed-methods project centers student attitudes toward AAS and advances a scholarly understanding of the challenges faced by newer AAS programs, which might go beyond identified institutional barriers. Answering these research questions allows us to contextualize individual and ethnic group-based experiences of the program in a formative way, and helps provide ideas on how to further build an AAS program that addresses student needs and interests.

Although it has been hypothesized and documented that many students seek out AAS courses to further understand their own ethnic and racial identities (e.g., Chan, 2005; Kodama et al., 2002), is this true for Asian American students of different ethnic groups or generation statuses? The data presented here profile the kinds of students who take AAS courses along ethnic lines, generation, and academic major, given the paucity of such studies on this topic (e.g., Kiang, 2000). Ethnic distribution is a particularly compelling question and may reveal patterns of marginalization of certain student groups from enrollment in AAS courses. In particular, scholars have critiqued the privileged positions of EAAs within the category "Asian American" within the field of AAS and the secondary positions of SAAs, FAs, and SEAs (e.g., Davé et al., 2000; Ong, 2003; Rondilla, 2002; Shankar and Srikanth, 1998; Toribio, 2005).

A few notable patterns emerged from a further examination of students who had taken AAS courses. Firstly, SAA students, compared to students from other ethnic groups, were least likely to take AAS courses. This finding corresponds with Inkelas's (2004) study of Asian American students who participate in ethnic extracurricular activities because of their meaning, ethnic match, and support they feel in such contexts. If students from a particular

ethnic subgroup, say SAAs, perceive the available course offerings or faculty to not represent meaningful, same-race or same-ethnic contact, they might decide not to participate in such contexts. Since 2003, however, the AASP has hired faculty specialists and created ethnic-specific courses in SAA studies and SEAA studies. Correspondingly, FAs in the study were more likely to take AAS courses than SAAs, perhaps due to the program's faculty specialization in FA studies and presence of FA student activism on campus.

This study contributes to the literature on the kinds of students that are more likely to take AAS courses. As practitioners and instructors seek to improve academic learning environments, it is a critical venture to assess educational contexts where students may be examining their identities (see Kodama et al.'s 2002 theory of Asian American student identity development). Responsiveness to the diversity of Asian Americans and their identities is crucial in developing programs considered vital for a diversifying student body and society (see Gurin et al., 2002, for a review). Although there was diversity in generation status, it seemed to have no relationship with taking an AAS course or perceptions of AAS. This likely is an encouraging finding that AAS was broad enough to meet the needs of students with differing immigration histories.

The finding that so few graduate students had taken an AAS course must be tempered by the fact that at the time the survey was conducted, there were only four AAS graduate-level courses. Additionally, degree requirement constraints, the fact there was no AAS graduate degree offered, and lack of awareness of AAS courses presented barriers to graduate student enrollment. Despite these barriers, however, there was evidence that graduate students are interested in taking AAS courses. The majority of graduate students in the survey did not list "lack of interest" as their main reason for not taking an AAS course. Many interviewees valued the program not only as an academic field but also as a space for support away from marginalization and isolation in their respective departments. Since the time of this study, AAS course offerings for graduate students have grown. A graduate minor was created in 2010, which now provides institutional incentive for graduate students to take AAS courses. Institutions should facilitate graduate students' academic involvement in AAS (and other ethnic studies programs), with the understanding that programs like the AASP serve more than a purely academic function. Strengthening ethnic studies programs may

help address issues of retention and recruitment of students of color, and higher education administrators should look beyond student affairs and student services for possible solutions.

The survey also found that taking an AAS course correlated with participation in an Asian American student organization. This lends support to a developmental model of Asian American student identity, suggesting a possible overlap of institutional and extracurricular resources on students' self-knowledge (Kodama et al., 2002). By contrast, undergraduate student leaders made a distinction between taking courses and feeling a sense of connection to the program. Eleven of the twelve students interviewed had taken at least one course and were leaders in their organizations but did not feel connected to the program. This study suggests that there is room for growth to bridge gaps between student organizations and academic programs. While efforts to create an AAS course with an applied learning focus were initially unsuccessful, such courses could help to address these connections. Institutions need to take a critical look at what counts as "intellectual" or "academic" content for AAS (and other academic programs as well). With nearly one-third of undergraduate AAS enrollees citing an AAS course as their most influential course, administrators should consider providing greater curricular autonomy to AAS programs to enhance students' educational experiences.

Students clearly value the knowledge gained from AAS. This finding also supports the need for continued growth and institutionalization of AAS and other ethnic studies programs. Lee et al. (2009) argued that AAS should continue to broaden its reach to graduate students and students not engaged in ethnic student organizations. Similarly, this study found that enrollment in a LAS major was related to taking AAS. Promotion of AAS outside its home college is another way to encourage support for AAS programs and departments. While students serve as advisors and advocates of AAS, there is also space for additional efforts in program, college, and university-level advising in conjunction with student-to-student recommendations.

Perhaps the most striking findings were that students who had taken AAS courses were much more critical of campus academic resources overall as well as specific resources for AAS, compared to students who had not taken any AAS courses. In short, students who were exposed to AAS wanted to learn more, and they did not

think the university's resources adequately supported their desire for more education. Students were dissatisfied with the lack of library resources and, more so, the lack of student services and AAS resources. From students' perspectives, support for AAS cannot be isolated from other campus resources, Asian American student services, in particular. Efforts to strengthen AAS must be accompanied with the expansion of Asian American student services.

### Limitations of the Present Study

There are several limitations to this study. The first is that it is exploratory; the AHC created the survey to gather a broad sense of campus concerns for Asian American students. The interviews with Asian American students add depth but were not conducted until 2007. Additionally, the data were taken from a single institution in an attempt to assess the growth and development of a specific AAS program in the Midwest, so generalizations should be cautioned. Asian American academic resources should be examined in each institution's context. Second, because of the small sample size, survey respondents were categorized into Asian heritage groups consistent with other campus studies examining Asian American student perceptions. Unfortunately, these groupings can obscure the different histories of various ethnic groups and the particularities of how and why they came to the Midwest.

Another limitation is that the survey and interviews were conducted with students who self-identified as Asian American, which raises a question of self-selection. Another question for further research is how the field of Asian American studies impacts non-Asian American students, especially in the context of requirements for multiculturalism and diversity coursework. For example, AAS courses at UIUC fulfill the general education requirement for non-western/U.S. minority cultural studies coursework.

Finally, the wording of the survey did not allow the authors to test further hypotheses about how AAS courses benefited the students, or why AAS students had more critical views of campus academic resources than non-AAS students. This limitation highlights future directions for research on the impact of AAS courses on individual students, specifically what cognitive, psychological, or political changes might have occurred for students enrolled in AAS courses that would lead them to a more critical awareness or understanding of campus academic resource allocations? The psy-

chological and social impacts of AAS on students also remain to be analyzed. What is the connection between the academic field of AAS and students' racial or ethnic identity development? Furthermore, given perceived "costs" of building a new program—from benefitting too few students to diffused responsibility for programming—an assessment of the larger institution would be helpful to determine whether the benefits of a new program outweigh the potential costs (see Chernis and Deegan, 2000, for a review of these costs and benefits).

## Conclusion

Emerging from a California base, AAS programs now exist across the country. This study examined an AAS program that experienced fewer institutional obstacles, particularly in areas of faculty hiring and financial support. The program has grown rapidly in its years of existence. Given these relatively healthy conditions, this study centers student voices and perspectives in order to better understand strengths and challenges of AAS beyond identified institutional factors.

## References

- Chan, Sucheng. 2005. *In Defense of Asian American Studies: The Politics of Teaching and Program Building*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Chang, Mitchell J. 1999. "Expansion and Its Discontents: The Formation of Asian American Studies Programs in the 1990s." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2: 181–206.
- Chernis, Cary, and Gene Deegan. 2000. "Creation of Alternative Settings." Pp. 359–77 in *Handbook of Community Psychology*, ed. Julian Rappaport and Edward Seidman. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Chung, Jennifer Y. 2009. "Relevant Activism: Contexts, Challenges, and Possibilities for Asian American Students." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Cook, Colleen, Fred Heath, and Russel L. Thompson. 2000. "A Meta-analysis of Response Rates in Web- or Internet-based Surveys." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 60: 821–36.
- Davé, Shilpa, Pawan Dhingra, Maira Sunaina et al. 2000. "De-privileging Positions: Indian Americans, South Asian Americans, and the Politics of Asian American Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3: 67–100.
- Diaz, Vincente M. 2004. "'To "P" or not to "P"?': Marking the Territory between Pacific Islander and Asian American Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7: 183–208.

- Endo, Russell, and William Wei. 1988. "On the Development of Asian American Studies Programs." Pp. 5–15 in *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects for Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur Hansen, and John Liu. Pullman: Washington State University Press.
- Espiritu, Yen L. 1992. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- "Facts 2009–2010." 2010. <http://illinois.edu/about/overview/facts/facts.html> (accessed January 19 2011).
- Gurin, Patricia Y., Eric Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin. 2002. "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes." *Harvard Educational Review* 72(3): 330–66.
- Hayasaki, Erika. 1998. "The Evolution of Asian-American Studies." *The Daily Illini*, 12 March.
- Inkelas, Karen K. 2004. "Does Participation in Ethnic Cocurricular Activities Facilitate a Sense of Ethnic Awareness and Understanding? A Study of Asian Pacific American Undergraduates." *Journal of College Student Development* 45(3): 283–302.
- Kiang, Peter N. 2000. "Long-Term Effects of Diversity in the Curriculum: Analyzing the Impact of Asian American Studies in the Lives of Alumni from an Urban Commuter University." In *Diversity on Campus: Reports from the Field*, ed. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. [No city of publication noted.]
- Kim, Hyung-Chan, ed. 1989. *Asian American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Kodama, Corinne M., Marylu McEwen, Christopher Liang, and Sunny Lee. 2002. "An Asian American Perspective on Psychosocial Student Development Theory." *New Directions for Student Services* 97: 45–59.
- Lee, Erika. 2009. "Asian American Studies in the Midwest: New Questions, Approaches, and Communities." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12(3): 247–73.
- Lee, Sharon S., Matthew R. Lee, Teresa A. Mok, and David W. Chih. 2009. "Looking Beyond the Numbers: Asian American College Students' Perceptions of Campus Climate." Pp. 193–218 in *New Perspectives on Asian American Parents, Students, and Teacher Recruitment*, ed. Clara Park, Russell Endo, and Xue Rong. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Ong, Aiwha. 2003. *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reeves, Terrance J., and Claudette E. Bennett. 2004. *We the People: Asians in the United States. Census 2000 Special Reports*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.



- Rondilla, Joanne L. 2002. "The Filipino Question in Asia and the Pacific: Rethinking Regional Origins in Diaspora." Pp. 56-68 in *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific*, ed. Paul Spickard, Joanne Rondilla, and Debbie Wright. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Shankar, Lavina D., and Rajini Srikanth. 1998. *A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Toribio, Helen. 2005. "The Problematics of History and Location of Filipino American Studies within Asian American Studies." Pp. 166-76 in *Asian American Studies after Critical Mass*, ed. Kent Ono. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Umemoto, Karen. 2000. "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strikes, 1968-1969: The Role of Asian American Students." Pp. 49-79 in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and James Gatewood. New York: New York University Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2010. "2010 ACS Tabular Profile for Illinois [Data File]." <http://www.census.gov> (accessed December 1, 2010).

We would like to acknowledge the support of Dr. Sharon S. Lee, Dr. David Chih, and Dr. Teresa A. Mok, who helped at various stages in the development of this manuscript.

---

MATTHEW R. LEE is an assistant professor of psychology at James Madison University. He teaches coursework on psychology and culture, lifespan development, and psychology and literature. He researches how phenotype is associated with discrimination on Asian Americans, and the effects of diversity coursework and classroom teaching strategies on student learning outcomes.

JENNIFER Y. CHUNG is an adjunct professor of education at Drake University. She teaches courses in diversity and multicultural education as well as women's studies. Her research interests include Asian American student activism, the experiences of students of color in teacher education, and multicultural education.