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Practitioner Essay

Incorporating Community Engagement into Asian American Studies Curriculum Reform

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Abstract

This article examines the assessment of the UCLA Asian American studies program and resulting curriculum reform that was put into effect as of Fall 2013. The essay will discuss the context leading up to the 2013 curriculum reform, including the 2011 UCLA Asian American Studies Curriculum Assessment Project, the departmental curriculum restructure process, the most recent Academic Senate program review, and initial response to the community engagement courses. This serves as a case study of curriculum reform that successfully addressed the needs of the students, met Academic Senate requirements, and returned the department to the original principle of service through community engagement and partnerships.

Introduction

In 2013, UCLA's Asian American Studies Department (AASD) restructured its curriculum in response to its first eight-year Academic Senate review (2008-9) since officially becoming an academic department. The restructure contributed toward the department's educational goals, which are (1) to mount teaching missions in ways that allow students to both benefit from a range of faculty expertise and grow in a nurturing intellectual environment; (2) to equip students with conceptual tools, research methods, and practical skills for analysis, communication, problem solving, and creative production in both academic and nonacademic settings; and (3) to prepare students for more advanced graduate studies or for self-fulfillment as citizens, professionals, com-

munity workers, political leaders, or entrepreneurs (Ling, 2016, 6). The restructure introduced a new required category for the major called Engaged Scholarship, which aimed at connecting students with the community primarily through community engagement courses focused on service learning and a capstone project. According to Vo, the professionalization of the Asian American studies (AAS) field has led to a disconnection with the larger community and concerted efforts are needed to reimagine how the field can impact and contribute to social change (2016, 127). The Engaged Scholarship component aims to reconnect academia with active community engagement and addresses students' demand for an applied component to the curriculum. The curriculum restructure was based on recommendations and findings provided by the Asian American Studies Curriculum Assessment Project led by Professor Paul Ong and the authors. This essay will analyze the process leading to the curriculum restructure and examine the initial efforts of community engagement courses, which may serve as a case study for other AAS programs exploring best practices to integrate community engagement.

Part I: Precurriculum Restructure

Asian American Studies at UCLA

As one of the oldest programs, UCLA's AAS program is the largest and most comprehensive teaching program of its kind (Hirabayashi, 2008). Founded in 1969 as a research center, UCLA Asian American Studies Center's top priority was research and publications with teaching as second (Nakanishi and Leong, 1978). In 1976, a teaching component was established as an Interdepartmental Degree Program (IDP), whose goals were focused on a multidisciplinary approach to the Asian American experience, promoting research, providing academic and leadership training, and preparing students for advanced work and degrees (Hirabayashi, 2008). The IDP became an academic department in 2004. At the time of the 2008 departmental review, the program faced decreasing enrollment. Only 50 to 60 majors and 40 to 50 minors were enrolled, while at the height of the program in 2001 there were more than 126 students enrolled in the major, not including the minor (Hirabayashi, 2008). One of the department's charges based on the review was to re-examine the curriculum to meet the needs of the students as their academic and professional concerns changed as one way to address the declining student interest. In addition to these challenges from

the university, given the history of AAS, the department must continually strive to serve and engage with the community. In an analysis of the formation of AAS programs, Chang reminds the field that as it becomes increasingly institutionalized, AAS must remember the essence of ethnic studies, whose history is based on challenging institutional assumptions, values, and practices (Chang, 1999). Under the direction of Professor Paul Ong, the authors conducted the Assessment Project to provide recommendations toward curriculum reform. The recommendations were presented to the AAS faculty to help them address the concerns raised during the 2008 departmental review process with an aim to increase student enrollment of the major, minor, and courses.

The Study

The UCLA Asian American Studies Curriculum Assessment Project was initiated in 2011 to inform curriculum reform. The primary purpose of the study was to understand student perspectives regarding AAS and explore factors that affected their choice in pursuing AAS as an academic major or minor. The authors decided to focus on three areas: (1) personal enrichment of students, (2) career/professional development, and (3) community and civic engagement that may influence a student's decision to pursue AAS and whether the department was successful in engaging students in those aspects.

Student development literature emphasizes the importance of higher education on the students' cognitive development (changes in how they think) and psychosocial development (changes in how they feel, behave, and interpret the meaning of experience) (Kodama et al., 2002). Asian American students also tend to be more influenced by external factors such as family, perceived labor market inequalities, racial isolation in atypical fields, and peer network (Poon, 2014). For students who pursued AAS, their primary desire to explore ethnic and racial identity as part of their personal development and enrichment outweighs other factors such as family and future earnings. Conversely, as with many social science and humanities majors, parents and students question the value of an ethnic studies degree that is interdisciplinary because there is a focus on the future earnings possibility of a major as a criteria for selection (Leong, 1991) and is a deterrent for those who do not choose to pursue the major. Another factor for major selection of AAS is the emphasis on social and civic engagement as part of service to ethnic communities and society has a whole (Danico and Ng 2004). Civic engagement can include community service, collective action, po-

litical involvement, or social change, depending on the perspective and interests of those engaged (Adler and Goggin, 2005). Additionally, civic engagement not only influences student development but also ethnic awareness and identity development (Park et al., 2009).

The assessment consisted of four different online surveys, two focus groups, and a review of current literature. The surveys targeted the following groups: AAS programs at different higher education institutions (17 usable responses), current UCLA AAS majors and minors (20 usable responses), current UCLA students who have taken only one AAS course (102 usable responses), and AAS alumni from any institution (118 usable responses). In addition, two focus group discussions were conducted: student leaders of UCLA Asian American-interest student groups (nine participants) and students who have never taken any AAS course at UCLA (six participants). The authors wanted to understand the perspectives of current students and alumni for pursuing AAS and any challenges they overcame in selecting the major or minor. The authors also wanted to understand the perception of AAS from students who have never taken or have only taken one AAS course and why they did not pursue the major or minor. In addition, the student leaders provided the perspective of those who were able to successfully achieve personal enrichment and engagement with the community without necessarily pursuing AAS.

While the questions for the surveys varied to adjust to the intended respondents, the primary aim of the alumni and student surveys was to understand whether factors such as the Asian American Studies Center, courses, extracurricular activities, friends, and family influenced their decision to pursue an AAS major or minor and to identify strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for the program. For alumni, the survey also asked if the AAS major or minor was related to their career goals and to identify any skills gained from the program that has helped them in their career or professional development. For the focus groups, the primary questions focused on understanding why students selected their majors and minors, their perception of AAS as a program, reasons why they did not pursue an AAS major or minor, and recommendations they have for the department to increase interest for the major and minor.

The study found that the UCLA Asian American Studies Department was most successful in fulfilling students' personal enrichment by providing students with an opportunity to gain an understanding of issues that affect their lives, their families, and communities, while

developing both personally and academically. Although, Asian American history is rarely taught in depth in K-12 education, an introduction to AAS has great potential to contribute to college students' personal development, identity formation, and interest in culture (Kodama et al., 2002). One alumnus explains that AAS provides an alternative narrative to orthodox accounts of U.S. history and society:

> Despite having come from a very Asian community, the school system doesn't provide for any knowledge more than a mere sentence about my family's background and what happened exactly during the Vietnam War. Coming to UCSB [the University of California, Santa Barbara], taking [an introductory Asian American studies course] really opened my eyes … it really opened the door and fired my curiosity—which eventually led me to wanting to pursue more about my ethnic history. It was such an eye opener—some things I've already known other things totally oblivious from.

A large majority of those strongly affiliated with AAS strongly agree with statement that AAS is personally enriching (see Table 1). Despite positive reviews of AAS in fulfilling personal interest and building self-identity, participants in the student leader discussion suggest that personal reasons often deter students from pursuing AAS. Students suggest that parents undervalue AAS. One student leader describes the parents' influence on course/major selection:

> A lot of us are first generation, second generation. We feel a sense of indebtedness [to please] our parents. It's like we have to repay our parents for the sacrifices they made. So they can pull this guilt trip on us, "Are you going into something that's not stable when I worked so hard for you. Why would you waste all my hard work?" That's what I hear from all my peers when I ask them about Asian Am.

Table 1. Alumni and Current Students Rate Personal Enrichment Well

Personally Enriching	UCLA Alumni	Alumni (non UCLA)	UCLA AAS Majors & Minors
Strongly Agree	83%	80%	55%
Agree	9%	17%	20%
Disagree	None	None	5%
Skipped	9%	3%	20%

The conflict between seeking personal enrichment and encountering negative parental and peer reactions is not unique to AAS; however, pressure from immigrant parents can be a major factor for Asian American students when deciding a field of study (Poon, 2014).

For AAS students, career development and civic and community engagement are intrinsically linked. AAS students want to serve the community through various fields as a professional in social justice. The study identified career preparation and guidance as relatively weak points in UCLA's AAS curriculum. Only 8 percent of the seniors who took only one AAS course stated that the department is doing "extremely well" or "very well" in response to the question "How well do you think AAS courses prepare students for a career?" Surprisingly, 36 percent of respondents believe that AAS courses do not prepare students well for a career. Those who major in AAS are less critical, due in part to self-selection; many see themselves working with Asian American communities or causes. Nonetheless, fewer UCLA graduates strongly agree with the statement "AAS has prepared me for my career" compared with their non-UCLA counterparts (see Table 2). About a quarter of the alumni felt that their education did not prepare them for their careers and was not beneficial in helping them identify prospective employers, prepare for job interviews, and perform well in interviews. Qualitative information provides some insights into the problems and limitations in career preparation. Students suggest that the lack of a defined professional path following AAS is a disadvantage of the major:

> Related to that, it's a new field. There's no exposure. A lot of people don't know what they can do with it. Some fields have set tracks, and Asian American studies does not. I think that scares a lot of people.… It's just seen as a hobby—like a nice thing you do to complement whatever else you're studying. "I have an identity"—a very shallow interest, but not something that can be taken seriously as leading to a career path.

Another student explains the difficulty of applying skills gained from AAS into a career:

> Sometimes I wish that was in our classes more. Although I really appreciate the theories and analytical framework that we learned, sometimes I do wish that we'd sit [in class] and discuss, "What are the applicable skills? What can I do?" I have all this wonderful knowledge.… But I don't know how to apply that theory to the real world.

AAS students and alumni have difficulty identifying career paths and translating the curriculum into marketable skills. The lack of opportunities to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges is not unique to AAS, but given its historical commitment to community engagement and social change, the shortfall is particularly glaring.

Table 2. Asian American Studies (AAS) Alumni Opinions on Career Preparation

AAS Has Prepared Me for My Career	UCLA Alumni	Alumni (non UCLA)	UCLA AAS Majors & Minors
Strongly Agree	9%	26%	15%
Agree	57%	41%	50%
Disagree	13%	26%	10%
Strongly Disagree	9%	1%	5%
Skipped	13%	5%	20%

Despite the resounding opinion that more is to be done in the area of career preparation, the study found that students and alumni alike are highly civically engaged. AAS students are involved in community-based activities, such as volunteering, political campaigns, and ethnic-based groups, both on and off campus. Other research has also shown that Asian American students are more likely to be civically engaged compared to the national population (Park et al., 2009). This is especially true for UCLA. The study finds UCLA alumni to be more engaged than their non-UCLA counterparts (see Table 3). UCLA alumni were highly engaged in off-campus volunteering during their undergraduate years. This type of volunteering is likely not regulated by the university, but students may have been referred by UCLA sources.

AAS majors are largely involved in ethnic-specific student activism. In a survey of AAS alumni, 77 percent stated that their participation in ethnic-specific student groups was "above average" or "average" during their undergraduate career. In a focus group of UCLA student leaders, one student describes how participating in an ethnic-specific student group affected the choice to pursue AAS:

> I got so involved with [an organization] and they really emphasize concepts like self-learning, learning about your culture. I felt like the work I was doing in [the organization]—that identity building, peer advising with high school students, and just the struggles and

> stories that they experience weren't being represented or recognized. Having a major that really validates all those experiences—it only made sense.… It helped in my own process of decolonization and finding my own identity as a Pilipino-American, a Pinay, a student, a person of color. It all made sense.

It is unclear whether this trend toward civic engagement is attributed to the department attracting highly involved students or the department serving as a catalyst for civic engagement. Even so, there is potential for the department to play a greater role in facilitating volunteer and engagement opportunities and for students to engage more on campus.

Table 3. Reflections on Civic and Political Engagement among Asian American Studies Alumni

	"More Than Average" Involvement in Extracurricular Activities	UCLA Alumni	Non-UCLA Alumni
Involvement during undergraduate career			
	Off-campus volunteering	65%	38%
	Ethnic-specific student group	57%	67%
	Other	48%	49%
Postgraduate involvement			
	Ethnic-specific activities	43%	34%
	Political campaigns	26%	12%
	General volunteering	43%	19%

Based on these findings, the study made these recommendations, which were presented to the faculty and staff in November 2011.

1. In regards to personal enrichment, Asian American studies majors and minors may benefit from a broad multidisciplinary and diverse curriculum. The department may also want to consider further diversifying Asian American studies by offering courses with a comparative race lens.

2. In regards to career, Asian American studies majors are likely to be interested in the intersection of professional practices and ethnic studies.

3. There is an opportunity for the Department to take a larger, more proactive role in being more systematically involved in engaging students with the community through courses on community engagement and internship or service-learning opportunities.

Part II: Postcurriculum Restructure

Community Engagement through Curriculum Reform

Based on the recommendations of the Assessment Report, the AAS faculty undertook a restructuring of the AAS curriculum. After receiving Academic Senate approval, the restructured major became effective as of Fall 2013. Students declared in the major prior to Fall 2013 were still able to follow the former curriculum. According to the 2016 self-review, the curriculum reform marks a major shift from a traditional emphasis on group identity and singular experience in AAS education to comparative and crosscutting modes of knowledge acquisition and transmission. The revised curriculum promoted collaborative and innovative teaching with an interdisciplinary framework while meeting the needs of students. The most significant changes to the major were the removal of the one-year foreign language requirement and the reorganization of required courses for the major into revised categories. Within this reorganization, students are required to take at least one course for each category, a community services requirement, and the capstone course to ensure that students are exposed to the breadth and depth of the AAS major.

Of the six categories required, the authors will primarily examine the courses under the Engaged Scholarship requirement along with the capstone course. These courses focused on community engagement as it provides students with the opportunity to gain practical experience while connecting the students with community partners beyond the classroom setting. The development of these courses directly addresses student concerns expressed through the assessment project in regard to applying theory and analytical framework into practice. The two primary courses are Asian Am 140SL: Power to the People: Asian American and Pacific Islander Community-Based Learning and Asian Am 185: Capstone Community-Based Research, which is designed to serve as a complement to the service-learning requirement for the major and minor. These courses were designed to connect students directly to established community-based organizations (CBOs) in the Los

Angeles area through service and scholarship. In the service-learning course Asian Am 140SL, community organizations open their doors to students allowing them to engage in and critically examine community organizing. The community-based research course Asian Am 185 was designed for students to fulfill a research need for a CBO client and focus on applied research. In addition, other courses such as Asian Am 143A: Ethnocommunications I: Introduction to Creating Community Media also involve considerable interaction with the community and are informally considered as service-learning courses.

The course objectives for AAS 140SL are to (1) gain knowledge of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities in the Los Angeles area and issues they face; (2) produce a work plan and asset assessment of service-learning site; (3) develop critical reading, thinking, and writing skills through a range of assignments in the course; (4) participate in the work of a CBO, learning from a CBO's staff, supporters, and constituents while honing interpersonal, networking, consensus-building, and other skills; and (5) learn from and work with other students to build a sense of community at a service-learning site and within the class.[1] The design of AAS 185 has varied depending on the instructor. We will focus on the original design of the course, in which a CBO serves as a client and students provide a research product to address a critical community issue. In an early iteration of the AAS 185 course in 2014, students teams worked with Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON) to partner with four CBOs in Asian American neighborhoods along Metro light rail stations to examine the impacts of transit-oriented development on small and ethnic businesses. The applied research product provided A3PCON and the CBOs with analysis of primary and secondary data on the subject. Student participants completed the course with greater knowledge of research methods as well as a concrete research product to be used in one's academic portfolio and as a writing sample.[2]

The authors obtained feedback from instructors and teaching assistants[3] of the AAS 140SL service-learning and AAS 185 community-based research capstone course. Those interviewed felt that the courses bring added value to the student experience. Instructors gave examples of positive student feedback; students extending their relationship with CBOs through internships, even changing their majors and career choices as a direct result of the course; and pursuing graduate studies in related fields. Sophia Cheng, the current instructor of the service-learning course observed that the course gave many students their

first opportunity working with an Asian Pacific Islander (API)-serving organization, and it was the first time for many students to experience hands-on application of theory that they learned in other AAS courses. For many students, these community engagement courses serve as an introduction to real-life application of AAS and the start of a relationship with CBOs.

For CBOs, while participation in community engagement courses builds a relationship with the department and with students who are potential future leaders, the course has its limitations. From author Sheila Sy's experience working in CBOs, the investment needed to orient and train service-learning interns often outweighs the potential output from a ten-week internship. Likewise, a CBO's research needs may extend beyond the capacity of the AAS 185 course. C. Aujean Lee, a former teaching assistant for AAS 185 suggested that in setting up the course, it is critical to limit the scope of the project. In Lee's experience, the instructors still contributed their own time and money after the course to ensure a quality final research product.[4] Clear expectations from both the department and CBO are critical to both parties mutually benefitting.

Recommendations

The addition of these courses makes strides to filling in the gaps found by the Assessment Project; however, more can be done to improve the courses and ensure they will be a lasting cornerstone of the department. The instructors of both courses discussed that the courses require time and energy before the course to set up the CBO partnerships. As the quality of the CBO partnership is critical to the success of the courses, it would be beneficial to have a designated staff member within the department to help facilitate the placement and connect with other CBOs to create new opportunities and partnerships with the students. Currently, the instructors use their connections with existing CBOs, but this process is not sustainable if the department needs to hire new instructors for the courses in the future, and it also limits the options for students as it is dependent on the instructors' background. By developing a more cohesive connection with local CBOs and steady community engagement opportunities, this will streamline the service-learning placements and research client, promote structured opportunities for students beyond the service-learning courses, and provide a more consistent resource for CBOs. Organizations benefit more from a sustained university partnership so that they can plan their volun-

teer and research opportunities ahead. Furthermore, for community engagement courses to translate into direct career outcomes, it is critical that the department to go beyond relationship building with CBOs. The department has a responsibility to support growth of the field through long-term, sustained partnerships (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy, 1993). From author Sheila Sy's experience, career positions at community-serving organizations are few. Most CBOs are underfunded and hire few career-level positions other than executive leadership. Furthermore, it is often the model for many grassroots organizations to hire from within, aiming their leadership develop training to support program participants to eventually become staff. With the scarcity of immediate job opportunities, another strategy is to broaden service learning to expose students to agencies that support CBOs, including technical assistance providers. While an emphasis on direct community engagement captures the spirit of the field, social change outcomes require a host of actors and resources.

Successful Implementation and Further Directions

Three years after the curriculum restructure, the department underwent another Academic Senate review during the 2016-17 academic cycle. Based on this review, the Senate report (Cooper et al., 2017) found that students are extremely happy with their experiences with a stronger undergraduate program. During the review committee's interviews with current and former undergraduate students, the members noted that students uniformly expressed that AAS was impactful in reorienting their perspectives on Asian American culture, heritage, and identity. The committee felt the restructure of AAS into a capstone major, which enables students to their knowledge and skills as the culmination of their undergraduate major in a project-based course, was successful in highlighting the commitment and passion of the core AAS faculty toward mentoring students. Although the courses are usually offered annually, students did express a need for more official service-learning courses as they felt those types of courses were beneficial to the curriculum. Along with the feedback from the instructions, the authors believe the department can further integrate community engagement into the department curriculum through staffing support to offer more service-learning courses, possibly through partnership with the UCLA Center for Community Learning and further developing opportunities with local CBOs.

While the Engaged Scholarship component of the curriculum pro-

vides an opportunity for students to gain hands-on experience to engage more with the communities they studied, it also provides them an opportunity to gain career competencies as defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers.5 From author Emily Le's experience in career development, departments can do more to promote the key skills students gained from their major and, in collaboration with the Career Center, advise students on how to talk about their skills gained from their courses and research. Additionally, the department can develop their own alumni mentorship program, which will give students an opportunity talk to alumni about their personal and professional development. While students can gain valuable transferrable skills through their academics, students still need coaching on how to present these skills to employers. Depending on the experience, AAS students can gain various competencies through their community engagement experience, specifically they have the opportunity to gain global/intercultural fluency. As more employers place increased value on the career readiness competencies, it is important for academic departments to proactively contribute to students' career and professional development through service-learning and internship courses, which also enable students to directly apply their theoretical foundation with community engagement. As students see the additional value of the major, more students are likely to pursue AAS if it can fulfill their personal, academic, and career development.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] Taken from Asian Am 140SL course instruction site. https://moodle2.sscnet.ucla.edu/course/view/17W-ASIAAM185-1 (accessed February 8, 2018).

[2] *AAS 185: TOD Impacts on Businesses in Four Asian American Neighborhoods Reports* https://www.urbandisplacement.org/case-studies/ucla (accessed February 8, 2018).

[3] The authors had e-mail correspondence with current and former instructors of Asian Am 140SL. Sophia Cheng, e-mail message to authors, January 31, 2018; David K. Yoo, e-mail message to authors, February 5, 2018; C. Aujean Lee, e-mail message to authors, April 25, 2018.

[4] This class is not the same as the one discussed earlier. Dr. Lee's class focused on efforts by community groups to gain official recognition from city government. The students produced several reports (Neighborhood Planning in Los Angeles Asian Neighborhoods, Preserving Ethnic Neighborhoods through Cultural Institutions, Asian Neighborhoods and Official Designation), which can be found at https://issuu.com/csiucla.

[5] Through a task force of college career services and HR/staffing professionals, the National Association of Colleges and Employers have identified the following seven competencies associated with career readiness as desired by employers: critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluence. http://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/ (accessed February 9, 2018).

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