

By Amy C. Wang, Jacqueline Mac and Samuel Museus 

---

# The Power of Ethnic Studies at Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions

---

So, like many other programs, students drove the creation of this Asian American Studies program. . . . A little over 10 years ago. . . . Undergraduate students engaged in campus activism through, sort of, organizing to meet with administrators and they also were able to build a coalition of staff and faculty and graduate student support. . . . I would say the main driving force was student activism.

**T**HESE REMARKS WERE MADE by an Ethnic Studies professor and director of an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) program on the east coast. In the interview, she highlighted the intersections among social activism, Ethnic Studies, and the AANAPISI effort on her campus. Her quote underscores how Asian American student empowerment and activism led to the emergence of Ethnic Studies and her own position. On this campus, Ethnic Studies was also instrumental in leading the initiative to designate their institution as an AANAPISI and securing federal funding to more effectively serve their Asian American and Pacific Islander college students.

Just as important as the power of student activism to catalyze change on college campuses is the potential of Ethnic Studies and AANAPISI programs to create the conditions for college students to develop their

consciousness of systemic injustices and capacities to engage in social justice activism. However, national discussions that focus on these intersections are not easy to find. In this article, we focus on how Ethnic Studies programs and curricula contribute to students fostering a critical consciousness or understanding of systemic social problems, as well as the agency and desire to address them.

## How Ethnic Studies Empowers at AANAPISIs

**AANAPISIs ARE FEDERALLY** recognized institutions of higher education that serve large numbers of Asian American and Pacific Islander students. Many of these campuses house targeted support efforts designed to increase Asian American and Pacific Islander college learning and success. Since the establishment of the federal AANAPISI designation in 2008, the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education has produced multiple reports that underscored that AANAPISIs can have a positive impact on the educational attainment of Asian American and Pacific Islander students. To achieve these outcomes, AANAPISIs employ numerous strategies and interventions that center the interests and needs of the students

they serve and the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

AANAPISIs that are awarded federal funding receive money to support academic programs and student activities aimed at serving Asian American and Pacific Islander college students. One key ingredient to the success of these students is the availability of culturally relevant curricula. In a national report published in 2018, Samuel Museus, Raquel Wright-Mair, and Jacqueline Mac described how AANAPISI initiatives collaborate with Ethnic Studies to help students develop academic, research, and leadership skills. These collaborations also provide students with critical space to meaningfully engage with people from similar backgrounds, learn about their own communities, and give back to their communities. As students learn more about themselves and their communities, they gain a stronger sense of identity.

Ethnic Studies at AANAPISIs also provides opportunities for students to see how their communities and identities are linked to larger structures in society. More specifically, Ethnic Studies allows students to learn about how systemic injustices harm the people they love and how their communities have played an instrumental role in combating these problems. For example, Nguyen et al. (2018) noted how Ethnic Studies courses can provide spaces where students learn about how systems of violence, such as racism and colonization, have shaped the experiences of Asian

---

All authors contributed equally to the production of this article. Names are listed in alphabetical order by first name.

---

**AMY C. WANG** is a doctoral student in Education Studies at University of California, San Diego, and a research associate for the National Institute for Transformation and Equity.

---

**JACQUELINE MAC** is visiting assistant professor of higher education and student affairs at Northern Illinois University and an affiliate faculty member for the National Institute for Transformation and Equity. Her research agenda examines racialized campus environments, institutional transformation, and educational policies aimed at advancing equity.

---

**SAMUEL MUSEUS** is professor of education studies at University of California San Diego and founding director of the National Institute for Transformation and Equity (NITE). He conducts research focused on diversity and equity, campus environments, and college student outcomes.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Ryan Evely Gildersleeve (aboutcampus@du.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.

American and Pacific Islander communities. They can also learn about the role that these communities have historically played in racial justice efforts, along with opportunities to link these histories with contemporary social movements and activism. Shirley Tang (2017) provided a concrete example of how Ethnic Studies at AANAPISIs leverages digital technologies to provide students with opportunities to link the challenges they and their families face, their social identities, and broader social issues seen across the United States and world. Tang describes how these experiences can make education relevant and foster profound learning about history, identity, and policy—as well as connections across these areas of students' lives.

## Ethnic Studies at AANAPISIs also provides opportunities for students to see how their communities and identities are linked to larger structures in society.

Clearly, experiences in Ethnic Studies at AANAPISIs can play a major role in helping students learn about their communities, developing their identities, fostering their agency, and understanding their role in larger society. But, how does this learning empower Asian American and Pacific Islander students to resist systemic oppression and contribute to positive social change throughout society?

## Centering Critical Consciousness and Commitment to Social Justice

**IN PAULO FREIRE'S** *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he defines critical consciousness as one's awareness of inequities created by social structures. Freire describes *conscientization* as one's awakening to these realities through learning how social and political conditions perpetuate the dehumanization of oppressed people. As people experience such awakening, they embrace their identity as members of oppressed communities. Such awakening can also lead to action to address systemic injustices and catalyze agency and action to eradicate them.

Freire highlighted the vital role of education in fostering awareness of systemic oppression. He described how education systems were founded on banking models and methods of education, characterized by

educators who view students as passive containers to be filled with knowledge. When educators approach learning in this way, they flood students with facts to be memorized, leaving little room for the development of critical thinking. By inhibiting students' ownership over their education and capacities to think critically, such education reinforces systems of oppression that are already in place. In the last half-century, Freire and many other scholars have advocated for a different model of learning—one that allows students to develop the capacities to solve real systemic problems and empowers them to do so.

One potential outcome of increased critical consciousness is resistance to systemic oppression. Henry Giroux explained how critical consciousness can lead to such resistance. He highlighted the importance of both social structures and human agency to argue that resistance consists of two essential dimensions—one's ability to critique social oppression and their motivation to fight for social justice (Giroux, 1983). A critique of social oppression refers to critical identification and recognition of how unjust systems operate while motivation for social justice depicts the desire to improve society to be more equitable.

## One potential outcome of increased critical consciousness is resistance to systemic oppression.

Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal explained that the presence of both a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice can enable one to more effectively engage in *transformational resistance*, which involves both a critique of systemic oppression and commitment to social justice (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). They clarified that only having a critique of social oppression without a motivation to advance social justice can lead to forms of resistance that are self-defeating because they do not lead to transformation of the system. They also argued that having a motivation to advance social justice without a complex critique of oppression can lead to forms of resistance that promote conformity to oppressive systems as a way to “beat” the system and address systemic inequities. According to Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, those who have both a critique of systemic oppression and commitment to social justice hold the most promise for transforming the system.

As we discuss in the remainder of this article, Ethnic Studies can cultivate Asian Americans and Pacific

Islander students' capacities to engage in transformative resistance. At AANAPISIs, these programs play an integral role in facilitating learning around systemic racism, identity, and larger sociopolitical issues facing AAPI populations and other marginalized communities, and they allow students to develop the capacity to advocate for social justice.

## The Power of Ethnic Studies at AANAPISIs

**TO ILLUMINATE THE POWER** of Ethnic Studies in empowering Asian American and Pacific Islander students, we center the voices of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at AANAPISIs and highlight the ways in which Ethnic Studies curricula fosters their critical consciousness and transformative resistance. The conversations are drawn from focus groups that were conducted at one west coast and one east coast four-year campus that participated in a national case study of AANAPISIs that demonstrated a positive impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander college student success. What we learned was that students view Ethnic Studies as a vital element of their college experiences and catalyst of their awareness and capacity to resist oppression.

### Raising Consciousness

The ways in which Ethnic Studies grounds learning in the authentic experiences of communities of color and identity make it an optimal space for empowering them. At AANAPISIs, Ethnic Studies curricula can help Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other college students foster a stronger racial identity and consciousness. For example, at one west coast campus, an Ethnic Studies learning community was embedded into the federally funded AANAPISI initiative. The learning community consisted of a two-course Ethnic Studies sequence focused on community, identity, and diversity.

The first course in the sequence focused on deep reflection and identity development. We learned from a group of students on this campus that the first course was critical to their identity formation. For example, Angel shared with us that

when I became part of the AANAPISI program and took all those courses, I did find my identity. I was able to understand that you need to be open-minded because the only way to appreciate diversity is to be open minded. With that, I learned to appreciate more about all the different ethnicities on campus.

This also resonated with Kai, who commented,

It gives you appreciation of your own roots, especially for me. I'm a Filipino American. . . . There was a time where I actually felt a little bit ashamed. I didn't know. . . . Joining the AANAPISI Project really changed my life. . . . It gives you an understanding and you just appreciate everything that you are.

In many cases, Asian American and Pacific Islander students never have significant opportunities to unpack and understand their own histories, cultures, communities, and identities before they enter college. Kai and Angel discussed being ashamed as a member of their ethnic community and lacking appreciation for their own and other people's cultural backgrounds before they entered college. They also described how the knowledge that they gained through the Ethnic Studies courses led to them embracing these aspects of their lives and cultivating greater pride in their racial and ethnic identities. Their discussion provides an example of the ways in which Ethnic Studies courses can facilitate students' rejection of internalized racism by eradicating their negative views of their cultural communities and themselves.

## ...Ethnic Studies courses can facilitate students' rejection of internalized racism by eradicating their negative views of their cultural communities and themselves.

The second course aimed to understand diverse communities and execute projects to give back to them. Alex expressed, "We don't learn about Asian Americans, but we learned about Native Americans, Hispanics and Chicanos, and Asian Americans. So, we were able to understand everybody's background and culture, to appreciate them more because this place is very diverse." Kai and Angel agreed and discussed how the second course prompted a shift from being ashamed of their own cultures to embracing these aspects of their lives and cultivating greater pride in their racial and ethnic identities. Their discussion provides an example of ways Ethnic Studies courses can facilitate students' rejection of internalized racism by eradicating their negative views of their cultural communities and themselves.

The students' comments also underscore how the Ethnic Studies courses taught them how their own

identities and struggles were connected with those of other groups. Understanding these intersections is important to comprehending the ways in which different oppressed groups are harmed by the same social systems. This awareness allowed students to develop their commitments and capacities to engage in collective efforts to advance social justice, which we discuss in the following sections. Finally, the increased value that students placed on their cultures and identities was also linked to increased voice and agency.

## Cultivating Voice and Agency

Ethnic Studies is not only about understanding culture and community. It also entails empowering students so that they believe they can do something to address the social and political problems affecting their communities. To realize this empowerment, educators often lead student to find their voice and passion. From this voice and passion flows a sense of agency.

When we asked a group of students at a west coast AANAPISI how their Ethnic Studies learning community cultivated this voice and passion through a wide range of academic activities, Dana commented,

We had a lot of summits, retreats, workshops, just a lot of events so it was like kind of an immersion into not only college but into this cultural diversity. . . . We are working on a service project that we feel very passionate about but we developed that from the first semester where we did a lot of reflections, a lot of papers, a lot of writing, and we had to just kind of dig real deep inside and then see what we are passionate about, so that really helped.

The group echoed Dana's sentiment and they all shared their enthusiasm for opportunities to cultivate their passions to advance social justice, such as addressing poverty, obesity, animal cruelty, and climate change. Another student, Charlie, emphasized that

these Ethnic Studies classes kind of provide you with the basics. . . . It's up to you if you want to go further. . . . They give you a foundation and set you up for learning about yourself and for you to take the initiative to take these other Ethnic Studies classes. . . . not because they are required but because we want to.

Bao agreed, "They just want to give you an open stage for you to voice yourself, voice your history, and voice your path and that's what they have done." Charlie and Bao went on to talk about how the Ethnic Studies curriculum provided a basic foundation of knowledge in the history and realities of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. Charlie even

shared that “they’ve taken the initiative to add Asian American Studies as a minor!” Bao ended by adding that the Ethnic Studies program has “brought all of us of different ethnic backgrounds together in order to basically build a circle and find ourselves and just reach out to motivate others as well.” The facilitator smiled hearing the students express an increased sense of agency and desire to motivate other people to embrace their identities and find their voice as well.

This conversation highlights how a student-centered approach to education rejects the idea that students are empty vessels. Rather than Ethnic Studies educators viewing students as containers to be filled with knowledge, they provided them with opportunities to develop knowledge, passion, and voice to continue to learn and effect change as they move forward in their lives. These realities often resulted in students lamenting the scarcity of culturally relevant educational opportunities across their campuses in education and feeling the need for more Ethnic Studies curricula.

**Rather than Ethnic Studies educators viewing students as containers to be filled with knowledge, they provided them with opportunities to develop knowledge, passion, and voice to continue to learn and effect change as they move forward in their lives.**

## Engaging in Collective Transformational Resistance

Once students have cultivated greater consciousness and agency, they are equipped to learn how to more effectively work with others to solve some of society’s most complex problems. Lee, a student at an east coast AANAPISI, even commented that the course “speaks to the quality of our instructors that they’re always able to relate Asian American history in a way that it’s not just about Asians in America, but it’s related to the struggles of different people.” In addition to cultivating consciousness and agency, Ethnic studies courses also catalyzed students’ commitment to engaging in collective transformational resistance.

We talked to a group of students at an east coast university about how the Ethnic Studies curriculum linked to the AANAPISI initiative on their campus. Sidney began by discussing the ways in which Ethnic Studies led to concrete campus activism through an event called *Celebrating AAPI Women* to address systemic violence toward this population. She shared that

it’s not just a way for us to give back to our community, but also start creating relationships between communities and I guess apply the things that we’ve all learned in these classes. Look, we’re all struggling so we need to start struggling together.

She highlighted the fact that the challenges they addressed also affected other women of color and that it is ideal for all communities of color to address them together. Robin also expressed the importance of interracial solidarities and collective action:

For me, I just think that it’s really hard for us to be perfect communities by ourselves. We have to grow up with other communities to make a bigger community all together. I feel like those classes do not just introduce our Asian American culture. It’s also that we have to open ourselves to other cultures. The class I was taking . . . only half of it was Asian American and the other half was people who are interested in Asian American culture. They wanted to learn about and explore more about Asian American history and everything. So, I feel like those programs definitely open up for every student who is interested in and then we will come together like all students that come from different backgrounds and different communities. We come together and explore other community identities and then it’s not just for us to accept our identity, it’s also for us to share with everyone what our identity and our culture means to us.

Robin noted that Ethnic Studies courses play a central role in providing students with space to engage across difference, share experiences across cultural communities, and learn about each other’s cultures and shared experiences.

Finally, Chris explained that Ethnic Studies courses provided opportunities for students to learn about the history surrounding interracial correlations in the fight against systemic oppression, as well as how knowledge of that history can inform more effective efforts to foster interracial solidarity and advance social justice in the present day. He shared the following:

As somebody who is mixed Asian American, I fall into a bunch of different kinds of communities. I never really understood what to do with that. Some

of the classes in Asian American Studies pointed me to multiracial coalition building and that was really huge for me. It was like, “Okay, so I can fall into a whole bunch of different kinds of communities and then I can also organize those communities and try to get them to work together and start to build a coalition.” That was huge for me. When I learned about the source of movement building for the Black Power Movement and the Yellow Power Movement and the Chicano Power Movement, when I learned about those kinds of interactions, I realized those sorts of frameworks are already there to organize across. That’s what I wanted to do. So that has directly resulted in an organization that I helped build on campus called the Social Justice Coalition. . . . I think being in the Asian American Studies program directly contributed to that sort of formation.

## Maximizing the Impact of Ethnic Studies at AANAPISIs

**THROUGH THESE CONVERSATIONS**, students illuminated the powerful impact of Ethnic Studies on their identity, awareness of systemic oppression, and pursuit for social justice at AANAPISIs. Their experiences in Ethnic Studies raised their awareness of social issues, led to an increased sense of agency, and provided the space and tools to engage in transformative resistance. Based on these conversations, we offer the following recommendations for AANAPISIs that seek to maximize the positive impact on their Asian American and Pacific Islander students and communities.

**Their experiences in Ethnic Studies raised their awareness of social issues, led to an increased sense of agency, and provided the space and tools to engage in transformative resistance.**

- *Recognize the critical role and potential power of ethnic studies.* It is apparent that Ethnic Studies plays a vital role in optimizing the positive impact of AANAPISI efforts on Asian American and Pacific Islander college students. However, AANAPISIs partner with Ethnic Studies to varying degrees.

Federally funded AANAPISI initiatives are not required to partner with Ethnic Studies at all, and the absence of such connections might limit the ability of these programs to have an optimal impact on students in communities who they serve. It is important that federal policy makers and AANAPISI campus community members recognize the value of embedding Ethnic Studies as a central component of AANAPISI initiatives.

- *Prioritize culturally relevant learning opportunities.* Ethnic studies courses positively influenced students’ identities, critical consciousness, agency, and engagement in social justice by grounding these conversations in students’ cultures and communities. However, AANAPISI initiatives can construct such culturally relevant learning opportunities beyond Ethnic Studies courses as well. If designed intentionally, centering campus conversations, guest speakers, and classroom activities that focus on Asian American and Pacific Islander communities can help students see how their lives are shaped by systemic social and political problems and imagine how they might address these challenges through social justice advocacy. Thus, AANAPISIs should integrate culturally learning opportunities into their efforts if they want to generate these positive learning outcomes.
- *Focus on raising consciousness and fostering agency.* If AANAPISI educators create opportunities for students to cultivate both consciousness and agency, they might be more likely to cultivate transformational resistance among students. In doing so, they can produce social justice advocates that are more equipped to effectively contribute to a diverse democracy and advance equity. We echo Sumi Pendakur and Vijay Pendakur, who suggest that fostering critical consciousness among Asian Americans should move away from one-time events and toward lengthier programs that center sharing knowledge and encouraging organizing.

The lessons and inspiration students gained from Ethnic Studies courses at AANAPISIs showed how transformative culturally relevant and student-centered curricula can be. As students learned more about their cultures and identities, they became more empowered and committed to fighting injustices affecting their own communities and other communities as well. These realities highlight the potential power of Ethnic Studies in AANAPISI efforts to advocate for and serve Asian American and Pacific Islander students and communities.


Emerging AANAPISIs that have Ethnic Studies departments or programs should consider how to

meaningfully partner with them to create initiatives that cultivate critical consciousness and transformative resistance. Emerging AANAPISIs that do not have Ethnic Studies programs should invest in the creation of and support for Ethnic Studies programs and departments.

**Emerging AANAPISIs that have Ethnic Studies departments or programs should consider how to meaningfully partner with them to create initiatives that cultivate critical consciousness and transformative resistance.**

---

**ORCID ID**

Samuel Museus  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0507-301X>

---

**NOTES**

- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Giroux, H. (1983). *Theories and resistance in education*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Museus, S. D., Wright-Mair, R., & Mac, J. (2018). *How Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander serving institutions (AANAPISIs) are creating the conditions for students to thrive*. Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions.
- Nguyen, T., Nguyen, M. H., Nguyen, B. M. D., Gasman, M., & Conrad, C. (2018). From marginalized to validated: An in-depth case study of an Asian American, Native American and Pacific Islander serving institution. *Review of Higher Education*, 41(3), 327-363. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0011>
- Pendakur, S. L., & Pendakur, V. (2016). Beyond Boba Tea and Samosas; A call for Asian American consciousness raising. *Focusing on the Underserved: Immigrant, Refugee, and Indigenous Asian American and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education* (pp. 55-71). Information Age Publishing.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Bernal, D. D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education*, 36(3), 308-342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085901363002>
- Tang, S. S. (2017). *Digital stories in Asian American Studies and co-producer knowledge in AANAPISI contexts*. Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions.