

Resource Paper

Healing in Community and Responding with Leadership:

Addressing the Pandemic and Anti-Asian Hate through Community Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

Community service learning is a high-impact practice that nurtures retention and graduation among undergraduates. Professor Yoo is a medical sociologist trained in public health who worked with the Auntie Sewing Squad during the pandemic to create facial coverings. Professor Jeung is a sociologist who cofounded Stop AAPI Hate in March 2020. Through an assessment of students who were involved in these two projects, this paper illustrates the efforts and impact of student involvement with the Auntie Sewing Squad and the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign. The findings showed that both projects created a space where students could integrate Ethnic Studies with the communities they served. In the face of uncertainty, fear, and exhaustion, these two community-service projects became examples of responding with resilience, healing in community, leading with care, and embodying solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper evaluates San Francisco State University students' involvement in two community-service projects. Both project outcomes were to increase students' awareness of and response to the

needs of AAPI and/or low-income communities. In particular, we were interested in how they strengthened students' leadership and community-building skills in a time of isolation.

Community-service learning is a high-impact practice that nurtures retention and graduation among students. Asian American Studies as a discipline has centered community service as central to teaching in our discipline (Dariotis et al., 2018). Remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a challenge as service learning could not be conducted face-to-face easily. Despite difficulties, the Asian American Studies program at San Francisco State University continued to promote community engagement by identifying needs during the pandemic and bringing students into two specific service-learning opportunities. Professor Grace Yoo, a medical sociologist who has training in public health, joined the Auntie Sewing Squad during the pandemic to create facial coverings as the first project. The second project, Stop AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islanders) Hate, was cofounded by Professor Russell Jeung along with Manjusha Kulkarni, the executive director of Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council (A3PCON) and Cynthia Choi, the coexecutive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) in March 2020. In the face of uncertainty, fear, and exhaustion, these two community-service projects built students' resilience as they learned new skills, demonstrated leadership, and created community. Through an assessment of students who were involved in these two projects, this paper illustrates the efforts and impact of student involvement with the Auntie Sewing Squad and the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign.

The first project, the Auntie Sewing Squad at San Francisco State, grew out of the need to provide facial coverings for essential workers and marginalized communities. In March 2020, as the U.S. government made confusing statements and requirements regarding facial coverings, the American public faced an overall shortage in masks. Comedian Kristina Wong emerged as a key leader who organized a Facebook group, the Auntie Sewing Squad made up of primarily Asian American women, to sew masks for health care and essential workers. The group started with 20 people and grew to 800 people. A group of fourteen students joined the Auntie Sewing Squad, which made masks to protect health care workers, grocery store workers, MUNI bus drivers, First Nations, and low-income communities throughout the United States (Yoo, 2021). San Francisco State students have taught

other students how to sew masks at California State University, Los Angeles, San Francisco State University, and Pitzer College.

While Dr. Yoo became heavily involved with the Auntie Sewing Squad, Dr. Russell Jeung had early concerns about COVID-19 becoming a pandemic in January 2020. He knew from Asian American history that when diseases came from Asia, others blamed and attacked Asians in the United States. Further, government officials would implement racist health policies as they did with malaria, smallpox, and leprosy in passing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Bubonic Plague in 1900. To document the surge in racism against Asian Americans, Dr. Jeung first worked with San Francisco State University graduate students in tracking news accounts of racism. With this data, he cofounded Stop AAPI Hate with CAA and A3PCON to gather first-hand accounts of discrimination. When launched in March 2020, the website received hundreds of incidents that have continued through 2021 (Jeung et al., 2021). San Francisco State University students helped clean the data, review incidents, and generate reports. They also were instrumental in establishing the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign that works with hundreds of high school interns nationwide.

For the Auntie Sewing Squad evaluation, the fourteen students involved received an online, open-ended qualitative survey, with eleven completing it. Assessment questions asked students their reasons for sewing, the difficulties and challenges of sewing, and the sense of community gained through sewing.

In evaluating Stop AAPI Hate's Youth Campaign work, nine out of the twelve team coordinators from summer 2020 participated in semistructured interviews. The interviews served as conversational reflections to gather insights on the emotions, thoughts, difficulties, and successes of their involvement.

Both these qualitative assessments were analyzed thematically to highlight the similarities between the two projects in terms of their creation of community in the height of the pandemic. Students of both projects took action to respond to the concrete issues facing their communities. Lessons on resilience, hope and healing, leadership, and solidarity emerged from the analysis.

FOUR LESSONS LEARNED

Responding as an Act of Agency and Resilience

These two San Francisco State University projects offered opportunities for students to take action and show up for the many

vulnerable communities in the fray of a pandemic. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress.” In our projects, students learned not only how to adapt, but *respond* to community asks and needs.

Students demonstrated such resilience by taking initiative to provide lessons from their Ethnic Studies courses and applying them to build spaces of resilience. Through creating and sharing space with others, these students were also able to process their own grief and trauma with the communities. Indeed, they built ways to cope in this time of crisis and found a sense of hope during the pandemic.

Students in the Auntie Sewing Squad participated as a way to take action during the pandemic when they could not go out. They reported feeling felt aimless during the pandemic but, according to one member, sewing masks was “a way to channel energy into something tangible” and provided support to different communities in San Francisco. At the time, masks were scarce and finding one meant you had to pay “scalper” prices. The sewing squad believed that masks should be accessible and making them seemed like “the right thing to do.” Students met weekly on Zoom learning about new mask designs from members of the Auntie Sewing Squad. They were also recipients of Auntie Care, receiving packages of fabric and homemade baked goods from the Auntie Sewing Squad. Through weekly interactions from other peers on Zoom and through a shared purpose of making masks for communities in need, students found a purposeful focus during this time of distress.

Likewise, coordinators of the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign felt an urgency in needing to respond to the surge in anti-AAPI racism. When San Francisco State’s campus closed and Stop AAPI Hate was created, both undergraduate and graduate students wanted in. The Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign became a space for students to put the Asian American Studies concepts they had learned—such as self-determination and collective resistance—into action. A participant shared that it “felt like [she] was part of history.”

By responding affirmatively to the racism, the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign helped San Francisco State students cope with the stresses of the pandemic. Students lost jobs and internships, had to move out of San Francisco because of its high rental costs, and couldn’t complete their courses needed to graduate. The youth campaign became a site where students gained and exhibited their resilience.

While navigating personal hardships that resulted from the pandemic, they were able to harness their passions, utilize their lessons from Asian American Studies, and support one another in responding to the crisis. The team coordinators dedicated their summer to programming workshops, educating younger generations, and helping produce policy reports and curriculum. To sum, both programs enabled students to take action, gain support, and develop resilience through acting on their own agency.

Hope and Healing in Community

The pandemic left students wounded, and in need of addressing the pain exacerbated by the world's condition. Both projects brought students together when yearning for community was at a high. Shelter-in-place orders challenged students to rethink their understanding of community that resulted in finding and building community online. In this case, we define community as "the cultural, political, social, and economic spaces and places that shape student and family realities." (Tintiangco-Cubales and Duncan-Andrade, 2021). Hope and healing in community with these service learning projects came about through showing up for one another, listening to each other's stories, and collectively seeking purpose through community organizing. These projects offered spaces of healing by addressing anti-Asian violence, and through holistic support of communities. In fact, the term "community" transformed to include virtual space as online meetings and formats became the only way to access one another.

For the students of the Auntie Sewing Squad at San Francisco State University, the project quickly became a vast and deep community of students, family members, and friends from all around the state. Community came together to sew for and support one another in an uncertain and distressing time. An undergraduate student of Sociology, Counseling, and Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University shared,

Community was built through the shared knowledge of sewing. The transferable skill of sewing allowed for more help in the force of the Auntie Sewing Squad. This led to the making of thousands of masks on a daily basis voluntarily for Covid-19 relief. We were in awe of how fast and wide the community continues to grow across the online platform of having shared internet access.

Another undergraduate student who studied International Business and Asian American Studies stated, Sewing online made me realize that we don't always have to be in person to create community. Sometimes it can be as simple as meeting once a week, doing an activity together, and getting to chat. These were probably my favorite memories.

This student spoke about the benefits and charms that regular social interactions brought to her and to her mental health. Regular interactions brought new meaning to community and relationships during this transitional period. Students realized that there are alternative ways in which they could work to restore relationships without being physically present with one another.

Just as the Auntie Sew Squad students found community online, the coordinators of the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign aimed at building rapport with each other and with the high school interns online. The coordinators had never used Zoom in this capacity of community organizing. Furthermore, most of the coordinators hadn't met each other. With interns from all over the country, the group coordinators were apprehensive about building teamwork among their small groups.

Fortunately, the coordinators were able to build a sense of community among themselves because of their shared values and connection to a larger cause. An undergraduate student of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University confided about participating in a larger movement,

I felt like I wasn't alone, and found a network of people who care about what's going on. Being with the team coordinators around our age felt good. . .to be a part of a community that has the same values, and wants to know the same things, and fight the same causes. It definitely felt like a community and something that was bigger than all of us.

Working online enabled community to be established even though coordinators and interns were spread throughout the nation.

As community was established, the youth campaign became a space of hope and healing in four ways. First, it provided a source of hope through the collective energy brought by the interns. One of the coordinators mentioned how encouraged she was "to see a younger generation be so invested in this work." Beyond providing a sense of hope, the program provided role models of wholeness. An undergraduate student shared, "I was surrounded by a really great group of role models,

mentors, and intellectuals.” The team had a deep-rooted respect for one another, where they learned self-care and self-respect. Third, the youth campaign provided students a community of people to trust and confide in. Having one another to process their traumatic experiences through the pandemic diminished the seclusion of quarantine. Finally, each of the team coordinators shared that the youth campaign community brought them closer to their Asian American identities as they led workshops on Asian American history and culture. In these ways, the youth campaign inspired the students and created space for healing.

Leading with Care

Beyond having opportunities to respond and to heal, the San Francisco State community service projects cultivated student leadership as they taught others to sew masks and conduct community research. Not only did students learn how to teach but also students learned how to mentor. San Francisco State University students learned the importance of sharing their cultural wealth as part of the process of helping others to develop their own identities and to invest in Asian American communities.

For instance, after Professor Yoo and the Auntie Sewing Squad students learned how to sew, they were eager to share their knowledge with students throughout the state. An Asian American Studies undergraduate student from San Francisco State University shared about her growing confidence in her teaching abilities,

The first time we taught other students how to sew, I honestly felt a bit under qualified considering I was kind of still learning myself. Nonetheless, it was comforting getting to teach alongside a fellow sewer. The second time we taught, I felt a bit more at ease because I had sewn my fair share of masks where I felt somewhat confident enough to teach another how to sew a mask for themself.

What started as a nerve-wracking experience of teaching turned into a rewarding and heartwarming practice of sharing. Simply learning the skill of sewing evolved into developing the art of teaching and leadership. Similarly, an undergraduate student studying Psychology and Education grew to enjoy the sharing process:

Teaching others how to sew gave me my first opportunity for self-reflection, in which I realized I was a lot more skilled in sewing than I thought I was. But it didn't really feel as if I was teaching at all. We shared some tips that really helped us with our sewing

journey and they asked us clarification questions. It was nice to share my limited expertise with someone through the internet.

As the Auntie Sewing Squad members mentored, they taught sewing skills and shared their passion for social justice.

In the same way, the coordinators of the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign grew leadership skills by mentoring others. Several students shared that the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign was their first time organizing in an Asian American space. When the team coordinators stepped up into leadership roles, they empowered both themselves and their interns. One team coordinator stated,

I'm usually the one who listens, and is in the back trying to absorb everything. But being in the space with the coordinators. . .being able to use my voice and practice amplifying that. . .and feel heard was really powerful. And also being able to work with students, who for the first time may have been really using their voice and standing up for something they really believed in [was powerful].

Leadership through mentoring included tough love when the coordinators expressed their care by holding students accountable. An undergraduate student of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University stated,

As a mentor, I gave guidance and helped as much as I could. I had to learn how to humanize others and understand other people's capacities. We had to have hard conversations with people and call people in to make sure that we were all in this.

By passing on skills and mentoring with compassion, the San Francisco State students developed their own leadership styles even while online.

Embodying Solidarity

Both service-learning projects ran during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement and even though these two efforts were AAPI centered, the students recognized the need to link their efforts with other racial justice efforts. Members of the Auntie Sewing Squad and the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign had to learn how to show up for their community while recognizing that other communities of color were fighting the same enemy of racism under white supremacy. The students of both projects embodied racial solidarity through understanding their unique positionality in doing antiracist work, educating themselves, and providing services for communities of color.

The students of Auntie Sewing Squad learned about the communities they were sewing for—such as incarcerated persons, migrant farm workers, First Nations members, essential workers, low-income Asian American elders, and detained immigrants—each week. Through Zoom meetings, students expanded their knowledge on the impact of COVID-19 in various communities of color and low-income communities. As facial coverings early in the pandemic were in short supply, students actively produced masks for these various communities. Sewing these masks became an act of solidarity for these various communities that suffered so much loss during the pandemic. A Humanities and Chemistry undergraduate student from San Francisco State University shared,

There were so many communities who were forgotten in the midst of the pandemic due to our government's lack of concern, and I was so honored to be a part of a group that is making sure that they aren't.

In the middle of this pandemic, sewing masks became students' approach to showing up for these communities who may have been ignored by the U.S. government. Without the ability to be present in real time for these communities, the act of sewing allowed students an opportunity to demonstrate their solidarity. While those communities were experiencing great losses, the students and their families were also experiencing so much. The majority of students had family members who were working as essential workers during the pandemic and so many of the students were also sewing for family members and their coworkers.

Beyond becoming more aware of other communities, coordinators of the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign recognized the need to join them in active solidarity. Some spent mornings and afternoons working for the youth campaign, and then spent nights on the streets participating in Black Lives Matter rallies. An undergraduate student at San Francisco State University shared,

You know, we're not all free until Black Lives are free. We need to stand in solidarity with them [Black Lives], so they can also stand in solidarity with us and know that we're their allies. We're not here to be against them. We're not here to play oppression Olympics. We're here to be with one another and [bring] hope for the world.

Others recognized that solidarity didn't mean they had to participate in every action. A coordinator mentioned,

One of my interns told me they felt emotionally torn working for the youth campaign with everything around BLM happening. We had to have many conversations around not having to choose between movements.

The youth campaign reinforced that activism around anti-Asian did entail partnership with Black Lives Matter in that we were together in dismantling white supremacy. Although we cannot physically be in two places at once, we can address racism at different fronts—in disrupting Black–White binaries as well as perpetual foreigner–model minority stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

These two community-service projects challenged students to learn new skills and demonstrate leadership. The Auntie Sewing Squad and the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign built students' resilience as they created community, found healing, and embodied solidarity.

The Auntie Sewing Squad sewed masks for underrepresented and underserved communities, from farm worker families to incarcerated prisoners. In a time of sickness, familial loss, and grievance, the students demonstrated resilience as they managed to take care of one another, their families, and themselves to keep sewing, so that more people could be protected. Students who just learned how to sew would go on Zoom and begin to teach others.

Similarly, coordinators of San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies Department stepped into leadership for the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign. Students led 100 youth interns across the nation over Zoom. Within a span of eight weeks, students completed several projects to respond to the surge in racism. As students grappled with the personal tribulations of the pandemic, the campaign provided all participants a community to rely on and with which to gain inspiration. In leading teams, the coordinators found purpose and inspiration from the youth they guided.

Both projects provide models for community service learning for online courses. Even in virtual spaces, students can come together within virtual platforms, provide services and programs for the broader community, and reflect together about lessons learned. At San Francisco State University Asian American Studies, even the key program outcomes for community self-determination and social change could be taught and shared through these project-based experiences.

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MEGAN DELA CRUZ (she/her) is a queer, disabled Pinay who has been researching the effects of deportation on a Filipinx American family. She has also had the opportunity to be a part of the Stop Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate campaign as a researcher and one of the inaugural youth campaign coordinators. Outside of her work with Stop AAPI Hate, she was a teacher with Pin@y Educational Partnerships. She currently organizes with Filipino American National Historic Society Orange County/Inland Empire and Kabataang Makabayan, Pro-People Youth LA, in Historic Filipinotown.

ALLISON HUYNH PHUONG is a first-generation college student who graduated from San Francisco State University in May 2021 with a bachelor of arts in Sociology, Asian American Studies, and Counseling. They identify as a mental health advocate, and continually fight and serve within the Bay Area behavioral health sector. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Allison joined the sewing force that is the Auntie Sewing Squad as an activist, producing masks to protect the lives of various underserved communities.

DR. RUSSELL JEUNG is Professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University and an author of books and articles on race and religion. In March 2020, Dr. Jeung cofounded Stop AAPI Hate with Chinese for Affirmative Action and the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council. It tracks incidents of COVID-19 discrimination to develop policy interventions and long-term solutions to racism. Stop AAPI Hate was awarded the 2021 Webby Award for “Social Movement of the Year.” *TIME* magazine named its cofounders, including Dr. Jeung, as among the top 100 influential persons of 2021.

GRACE J. YOO is a professor and former chair of the Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State University. Professor Yoo also serves as the project director/principal investigator for two Department of Education AANAPISI grants, *Asian American and Pacific Islander Retention and Education* (ASPIRE) and *Responsive Education for Access, Community, and Hope* (REACH). Her work and service has received numerous awards including being a recipient of the Association of Asian American Studies Excellence in Mentorship award and the American Sociological Association Asia/Asian American section Best Book Award for *Caring across Generations: The Linked Lives of Korean American families* (coauthored with Barbara Kim).

