

Practitioner Essay

## Framing a Practice of Asian Americanist Advocacy

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay presents a framework for a practice of Asian Americanist advocacy. Participant observers discuss a case study of a community college in northern California where Asian American employees have sustained organized advocacy since May 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement. The heuristic framework introduces four questions to help practitioners determine the direction of their advocacy, focusing on approaches to self-organizing, analyses of racial relationality, and engagements with institutional power. The case study highlights tensions around the legibility of Asian Americans in campus discourse, the politicization of Asian American employees, and the efficacy of Asian Americanist advocacy.

### **INTRODUCTION: ORGANIZING IN THE MOMENT**

The confluence of three contexts since 2020 has quickened Asian American activism on U.S. college campuses, by not only students but also employees. This has touched off predicaments about the presence and place of Asian Americans when confronting U.S. racism in institutions of higher education.

First, the movement for Black Lives Matter (BLM) has demanded colleges undo entrenched anti-Black racism as part of America's reckoning with endemic racial inequities (Bradley, 2016; Libresco, 2015; McKenzie, 2020). The murder of George Floyd in

May 2020 ignited mass outrage and remobilized the BLM movement nationally. Across the country, Asian American students, faculty, and staff joined in solidarity with Black peers and colleagues. Employee actions included condemnations of state-sanctioned racial violence and anti-Black racism, support for greater racial diversity among faculty ranks, expansion of ethnic studies programs, teaching of racial justice, and removal of campus police through abolitionist work (Anaya-Morga, 2020; Saint Mary's College, 2020; University of Illinois at Chicago, 2020).

Asian-Black coalitional affinities in college activism exist yet vie with unresolved frictions symptomatic of broader U.S. racial formations. In so many words, Asian Americans are asked to clarify where we stand in America's field of racial positions: *When a white/non-white racial divide operates, what relationship do Asian Americans have to whiteness? When a Black/non-Black racial cleavage matters, what relationship do Asian Americans have to blackness?* (Kim, 1999; Putterman, 2016; Sharma, 2017; Tran, 2021).

Second, Asian American activism has responded to escalated anti-Asian racial violence and scapegoating during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> In a period of mostly online education and remote work, Asian American students, faculty, and staff have held webinars, teach-ins, town halls, and community-processing meetings to address the immediate well-being of Asian American campus communities (MGH Institute of Health Profession, n.d.; PEN America, 2020; Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute, 2021). Asian American students have critiqued the shortcomings of their institutions and called for counseling services attuned to Asian American (AA), Desi American, and Pacific Islander (PI) students; increased funding for cultural centers; better discrimination grievance reporting systems; and Asian American studies programs (Diep, 2021; Jones and Smith, 2021; Redden, 2021). Faculty and staff have denounced anti-Asian racism, given congressional testimony on anti-Asian discrimination, and written op-eds (Choo and Diaz, 2021; Klitzing, 2021; University of Connecticut, 2021; University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2021). One key refrain among advocates is that Asian Americans' needs on campuses have been long-standing but unaddressed (Constante, 2019). Consequently, there is skepticism that schools will enact substantive change (Lawsin and Kurashige, 2021). In the face of institutional inertia, indifference, or insufficiency, what are Asian American activists to do and for how long?

The third context is the persistent trouble that higher education has in recognizing Asian Americans in educational priorities. For many Asian American educational researchers, it is near cliché now to deconstruct the trope of the model minority and how it operates in schools: uncritical and essentializing aggregation of “Asian Americans” into one undifferentiated group (to say nothing about the term “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders”) has allowed prevailing presumptions about exceptional studenthood, high achievement, and minimal needs to universalize the circumstances of all Asian Americans and outsize consideration of Pacific Islanders. Legislative approval in 2007 of the federal designation and grant program called Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) was precisely an attempt to disrupt the dominant logic that AAPIs are “inauthentic” minorities with no legitimate claim on federal educational resources (Park and Teranishi, 2008, 112; Pimentel and Horikoshi, 2016, 69).

Still, AANAPISI grant-awarded colleges struggle with implicit and explicit insistence that race-conscious programs tailored to AAPIs are unnecessary or displace schools’ abilities to address other students’ needs (Alcantar et al., 2019). This is even the case at community colleges, where more than 40 percent of AAPI college students attend, and when focusing on low-income or first-generation college-going students (Lee and Tomaneng, 2020). It is rare for colleges to care for the well-being of AAPI students by proactively disaggregating student data, rethinking divisive zero-sum resource allocation mindsets, and opposing the historical function of the model minority narrative in disparaging non-Asian minoritized groups and evading challenges to white dominance (Kurland et al., 2019; Poon et al., 2016). How then do Asian American activists undermine the frame of the model minority in the workplace and generate institutional humanization of Asian American campus communities?

This essay grapples with the predicament of Asian American activism in this historic moment with a focus on college employee advocacy.<sup>2</sup> Asian American faculty and staff navigate their activism by working within organizational bounds as employees and colleagues, often beyond their job functions. Given this, campus activism likely produces certain irresolute tensions. The complexities of racial self-positioning on a multiracial campus in the context of BLM, the normalized institutional disregard of Asian Americans’ experiences, and the discounting of calls for organizational change based on the

needs of Asian Americans set the stage for this engaged practice, what this essay calls *Asian Americanist advocacy*.

### **Backdrop to Our Story**

Our story takes place at a community college in Santa Clara County founded in 1967 where the demographic prominence of Asian Americans contrasts with its uneven recognizability in meriting particular institutional resources.<sup>3</sup> The county population is nearly 40 percent Asian American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The student body is almost 19,000, with 4 percent identifying as African American, 47 percent as Asian American, 27 percent as Latinx, 0.4 percent as Native American, 0.9 percent as Pacific Islander, and 18 percent as white. Among its almost 1,000 college employees, African Americans comprise 4 percent, Asian Americans 24 percent, Latinx 14 percent, Native Americans 0.5 percent, Pacific Islanders 0.6 percent, and Whites 50 percent (NCCC Institutional Research and Planning Office, 2020a, 2020b).

An AAPI employee affinity group (AAPIEAG) formed in 1990 to “serve as a vehicle for articulating the views and concerns” of AAPI campus communities (NCCC Asian Pacific American Staff Association, 2000). One of its early actions was the successful lobbying to hire a full-time, tenure-track, Vietnamese-speaking counseling faculty. With curriculum, the college offered its first Asian American studies course in 1970, after the establishment of an academic division dedicated to ethnic studies in 1969. In 2019, the longtime department chair of Asian American Studies (ASAM) retired, and the college did not subsequently approve rehiring for the position. Another tenured faculty of ethnic studies unofficially stepped in for continuity.

In the 2008 inaugural year of the AANAPISI program, the college was awarded its first grant to improve access to college resources; student persistence and college readiness; and course success among Filipinx, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian students. A second grant in 2011 focused on transfer pathways, college readiness, and access to STEM majors for the same populations. When the grant ended in 2017, the college struggled to institutionalize the array of grant-inspired initiatives. What remained was a single cohort-based learning community with a part-time counselor. The position later became full-time, though non-tenure-track and renewed yearly.

With this backdrop, our story of Asian Americanist advocacy unfolded in 2020.

## A Heuristic Framework

This essay presents a framework for a practice of Asian Americanist advocacy. The discussion derives from a case study of a twice-awarded AANAPISI community college where Asian American employees have sustained organized advocacy since May 2020. The framework is a heuristic aimed at practitioners engaged in workplace advocacy. We pose four questions to frame advocacy as iterative collective learning in the process of self-organizing. The four questions are:

1. What makes advocacy for Asian Americans necessary and urgent?
2. What are the available tactics for Asian Americanist advocacy?
3. What does building a community for Asian Americanist advocacy entail?
4. What is the end goal of Asian Americanist advocacy?

The purpose of the questions is threefold. The first is to support organizing that aims to articulate and press for the needs of Asian Americans within organizations, primarily in higher education but relevant to other settings as well. The questions aim to facilitate self-knowledge and efficacy through reflexive group deliberation.

The second purpose is to prepare advocates for predicaments that such organizing stirs when carried out by and on behalf of Asian Americans within multiracial and bureaucratic organizations. We trace arising tensions to identify how they at once trouble and animate Asian Americanist advocacy, sparking flashpoints within institutional settings (Schlund-Vials, 2017). These flashpoints emerge as moments of turbulence for Asian Americans who must contend with a range of reactive emotions—such as anger, confusion, resentment, mistrust—expressed by other members of the organization. These flashpoints reflect the vexed position of Asian Americans as we engage with the potential and limitations of our own humanizing aspirations.

Our third purpose is to encourage everyday workplace engagement with Asian American studies. Scholars have questioned the insularity of Asian American studies, institutionalized in the corporate university (Ono, 2008; Schlund-Vials, 2017; Yu, 2017). The exclusivity of the academic networks in which Asian American studies is produced and circulates has been the source of its professional legitimacy and cultural capital (Chiang, 2009). At the same time, it generates uneasiness about the field's political complicities and reach as a transgressive and transformative counterdiscourse. It is canonical to trace the roots

of Asian American studies to its late 1960s declared mission to “serve the people,” its Third World identification, and anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist politics (Chan, 2005; Jeung, 2019; Murase, 1976). We are now fifty years later—in a moment of escalated anti-Asian violence and questionable responses by the government, schools, workplaces, and network news media (Cheah et al., 2021; Ishak, 2021; Liu, 2021; Zheng, 2021). In spite of Asian American studies’ professionalized status in academia, we might ask: How consequential has Asian American studies been in shaping the national discourse of race and the public’s knowledge about U.S. racism with Asian Americans in mind?

In our age of new social media, some hope has been pinned on Asian Americanists’ finding public outlets to spread the epistemology and sensibility of Asian American studies (Yu, 2017). Since the start of pandemic-related “anti-Asian hate,” scholars have used public platforms to situate anti-Asian racism in a long tradition of U.S. state-sponsored racialization and subordination of Asians and as constitutive of both xenophobic national identity-making and a society structured jointly by antiblackness and white dominance (Cheng, 2021; Lee, 2020, 2021; Onion, 2021). These Asian Americanists provide a public service that our nation’s education system fails to do: teach U.S. history refracted through Asian American history. This is vital work. We also believe there is space to be carved out for emboldening engagement with Asian American studies by nonspecialists. We use our story of Asian Americanist advocacy to illustrate and reimagine “Asian Americanist” less as a noun reserved for scholars and more as an adjective to describe the ever-evolving activist labor of Asian American employees—including but not exclusive of Asian American studies experts.

In this spirit, this essay engages in activist scholarship (Fujino and Rodriguez, 2019, 127). Topically, our case study is about collective organizing among Asian American employees who are advocating to transform the workplace—a community college. Importantly, our individual relationships to Asian American studies vary greatly: some of us teach Asian American studies, some have taken courses, and some have had little to no exposure. Yet, as a group, we discuss ideas from Asian American studies and deploy its resources. Our work is Asian Americanist in the sense that we labor to connect our advocacy with Asian American studies’ investments in anti-racist, intersectional, and racial relationality politics (Kim, 1999).

Self-reflexively, as the authors, we write based on our participant observation as employees who have been active in Asian American–organized advocacy. Both of us have served as convener and facilitator of these efforts.

Mae Lee has taught ethnic studies at NCCC since 2001. She directed the college’s first AANAPISI grant. Since 2019, she has chaired Asian American Studies Department. With the advocacy discussed, she co-facilitated a group of Asian American employees on a weekly basis for three months beginning in May 2020—the ad hoc advocacy working group (AWG). She is a member of NCCC’s AAPIEAG.

Khoa Nguyen is a counselor of NCCC’s Math Performance Success program and has worked at NCCC since January 2017. From 2018 through 2020, he served as an officer of AAPIEAG. Starting in September 2020, he convened AWG biweekly. In November 2020, AWG became a formal subcommittee of AAPIEAG—the advocacy core team (ACT)—which he continues to facilitate to the present.

For simplification, we refer in the essay to Lee and Nguyen as the facilitators of AWG and ACT, respectively, even though we have partnered throughout.

### **ASIAN AMERICANIST ADVOCACY: SUBJECT AND OBJECT**

Our use of the term *Asian Americanist advocacy* gestures toward a project of politicization. We approach Asian Americanist advocacy not to insist on the stability of a fixed notion of *Asian American* or *activism* (Chuh, 2003; Espiritu, 1992; Friday, 1994; Fujino and Rodriguez, 2019; Vo, 2004).<sup>4</sup> That would presume a coherence of subjectivity and a political consensus that we examine rather as social formations in the making. We suggest that to name the “we” as the subjects of Asian Americanist advocacy is an assertion of presence (that of ever-emergent Asian Americans) that simultaneously acts as a calling into being of a collectivity. We share in the formulation that “liberatory Asian American activism is rooted in an identity shaped by politics, rather than a politics derived from identity” (Fujino and Rodriguez, 2019, 120). We use *Asian Americanist advocacy* as a phrase to point to a collective practice that wrestles precisely with the meaning of Asian American identification in relation to critique and action-taking. Our discussion of Asian Americanist advocacy thus unfolds as an intertwined story of political subject-making and organizational change.

We do believe that there can be different proficiencies with Asian Americanist advocacy. Hence, this practitioner essay. We focus on an advocacy practice that reaches toward knowledge produced by Asian American studies and by systems thinking to a lesser degree (Kania et al., 2018; Senge, 1994). Asian American studies has been the primary field of knowledge that has laid out histories of U.S. racism centering Asian Americans. Therefore, we suggest that practitioners of Asian Americanist advocacy would be better equipped to address flashpoints based on familiarity with Asian American studies' contentions about identity formation, differential racialization, political subjectivity, activism, and history, to name a few core analytics. We bring in also systems thinking, the practice-oriented literature of organizational change. Ethnographically speaking, our use of systems thinking was more by chance than intentional. We describe it in the essay to the extent that it became useful in our self-evaluation rather than for theory-building purposes.

We add to scholarship in Asian American studies on activism outside of the more familiar domains of social movements, civil rights lobbying, and electoral politics (Fujino and Rodriguez, 2019). Our auto-ethnographic case study of a community college offers an example of scholar-activism that shrinks the divide between "the community" and "the scholar" (ibid., 127).

What follows is our story of employee activism (denoted by italics) that we elaborate upon as we discuss the four questions of our framework.

### **The Story**

*In May 2020, the college entered the final stages of a presidential search. None of the finalists for college president expressed substantive knowledge about or work experience with AAPI students. This alarmed members of ASAM and AAPIEAG. Over four days, thirty-three faculty and staff signed a Letter of Concern and sent it to the district chancellor and the search committee. The letter was also presented at the faculty and student senates. The search process proceeded. Two weeks later, police killed George Floyd in Minneapolis. The college named one of the three finalists the new president.*

*In response, an ad hoc AWG formed and met weekly to strategize ways to hold the college accountable to the stated concerns in the letter. The broader intention was to ensure the college attend to the needs of campus AAPIs in support of racial equity at the institution. AWG identified leverage points and*



*emergent challenges. It mapped governance and decision-making bodies. It welcomed the new college president and requested quarterly meetings. Individual members reached out to the Black and Latinx employee affinity groups. Members also observed that previously expressed needs of AAPI communities were increasingly dismissed by peers and administrators now pressed to address antiblackness.*

*In November 2020, AWG became the official ACT of AAPIEAG, which the college recognized anew with allocated voting seats on campus governance bodies. ACT met biweekly to build the community of advocates, figure out how to handle resistance to its work, and coordinate tactics for involvement and accountability in campus decision-making.*

*That same month, almost half a year after writing the letter, a pivotal moment developed. ACT heard that officers of the Black employee affinity group (BEAG) were upset with Asian Americans for their advocacy work. ACT met with BEAG. With emotions high, a number of vocal senior members of BEAG castigated ACT for racially targeting the new president with the letter because he was Black. They expressed how hurtful the letter was to them. Other members of BEAG expressed support for cross-racial alliance and continued partnering. This meeting unnerved ACT. Months before, ACT members internally and publicly had expressed solidarity and supported BEAG's demands. Now, many members worried about the fragile relationship between the two groups and questioned their advocacy efforts.*

In the context of this story, we explore the four questions of the framework by examining more closely our own practice of Asian American advocacy.

### **Guiding Questions and Arising Tensions**

*Question 1: What makes advocacy for Asian Americans necessary and urgent?*

The first question requires practitioners to assess the need for Asian Americanist advocacy at their institution, asking what about the moment compels action taking. This necessitates an articulation of purpose—the rationale for advocacy, its immediate form of action, short-term objectives, and long-term goals. Practitioners make sense of what has happened in the organization, what needs to happen next, and how to get there. By doing this, practitioners create a shared origin story that enables advocacy to begin. Likely, there may be a precipitating event that prompts the call for organizing.

As practitioners reflect, they might find conditions that have warranted advocacy for some time. Decades of scholarship attest to the challenges AAPI students (and employees) face in higher

education, including educational disparities among ethnic groups, racial microaggressions by peers, worrisome mental health, invisibility in curriculum, unrecognized student needs due to aggregated data, English-language learning and college preparation needs, and explicit and implicit racialized ideas about the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigners” that serve to rationalize dismissal of these problems while also undermining attention for Pacific Islanders (Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund [APIASF], 2013; Assalone and Fann, 2017; Hsieh and Kim, 2020; Hu, 2019; Murphy-Shigematsu et al., 2012; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2008, 2010, 2013; Ng et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2007). In short, institutions overlook the needs of AAPIs with regard to college priorities and racial equity and diversity. So, if the need for Asian Americanist advocacy is ever-present, why doesn't it always materialize? This is a tension that we experienced. Here we return to our story.

*In its early years, AAPIEAG actively advocated for the recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of Asian American college employees. Of late, the organization had turned more toward social functions (i.e., fundraising for scholarships, hosting happy hours). This shift led to discontent among some members. In November 2018, a few Asian American faculty and staff began to organize monthly Friday gatherings for AAPI employees—with a potluck lunch and facilitated casual conversation. The group began with thirteen invitees and grew to thirty-seven by March 2020. This created a new space for personal and professional sharing, a fresh sense of community, and a forum for frank conversations.*

*The conversations sometimes broached the college's shortcomings. In 2016, the one Asian American senior administrator departed. In 2017, the college's second AANAPISI grant ended. Some individuals were dissatisfied with AAPIEAG's lack of advocacy for hiring Asian Americans. Others criticized the college for failing to institutionalize grant initiatives. There was much to warrant Asian Americanist advocacy. Yet, there was no mobilization.*

*When the college moved into the last phase of a presidential search in mid-May of 2020, all three finalists had little to say about AAPIs. In response to a question during open forums about their familiarity with AANAPISI and Filipinx, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian students, two finalists admitted their lack of experience with these populations, with one asserting that his work with Black and Latinx students would be transferable to AAPI students. The third finalist, though not asked directly, volunteered no comment about any AAPI populations. This resounding*

*silence remained unremarkable to the search committee and the college at large. This worried members of ASAM, resulting in the department chair's calling for an urgent meeting with ASAM and AAPIEAG the day after the last finalist's open forum.*

*This town hall meeting on May 15, 2020, one day after the meeting request, allowed members of the two groups to compare their impressions of the candidates. Members agreed to support a Letter of Concern. Over a weekend, the letter garnered thirty-three signatures from faculty and staff of various offices. It was sent to the chancellor and the twenty-two members of the search committee, three of whom were Asian American (including two AAPIAEG members). The letter underscored the national context of the moment with heightened anti-Asian scapegoating. The letter urged that the next college president have "an attuned sensibility and set of skills capable of recognizing when bold college leadership is needed, particularly when a minority group of the college community becomes an exposed target across the country." It pressed for a "president who can exhibit foresight, courage, discernment, and action in speaking up for historically marginalized communities. Importantly, this includes speaking up for AAPIs" (ASAM and AAPIEAG, 2020).*

*The letter prompted a meeting invitation from the chancellor. This marked the beginning of Asian Americanist advocacy work for many members of the college.*

The catalyzing event that pushed our Asian Americanist organizing into action was the presidential search. Disappointment with the finalists spurred individuals in pivotal organizational positions (in ASAM and AAPIEAG) to assert the existence of a clear and urgent problem, and then mobilize a collective response. While three Asian Americans did serve on the search committee (all of whom may have identified as advocates for AAPIs), their representation did not translate into finalists with expressed familiarity with AAPI students. This illustrates that having Asian Americans at the proverbial table does not equate to efficacious Asian Americanist advocacy.

Our answer to the first question reveals the institutional conditions that warrant Asian Americanist advocacy and the practicalities of mobilizing collective action.

*Question #2: What are the available tactics for Asian Americanist advocacy?*

The second question asks practitioners to reflect on options for advocacy, noting potential resistance and challenges. Practitioners may weigh tactics and anticipated reactions, gauging collective and individual capacities to respond to those reactions. They may also

identify organizational habits and norms to calculate suitability of options. Because interventions affect not only the institution but also employees, work relationships, workload, professional reputations, and possible career trajectories, practitioners necessarily appraise tactics with both efficacy of actions and personal impact in mind. A series of moments illuminate specific tensions we faced.

*When members of ASAM and AAPIEAG met to discuss their concerns about the presidential finalists, they deliberated whether to call a halt to the search process or to express willingness to work with any of the chosen finalists. AWG decided on the latter, conveying this in the letter. Preparing to meet with the chancellor, they discussed what tone to pursue: to ask “nicely” for things or make “aggressive” demands. In the end, the conversation with the chancellor was collegial, collaborative, and firm. Twenty-seven individuals attended, all members of AWG or AAPIEAG, including an Asian American district trustee. There was a historical evaluation of “progress” by the chancellor and the former ASAM chair, both of whom agreed that, in their shared thirty years at the college, “not much has changed” for AAPIs. The meeting adjourned with the chancellor pledging her support for the group’s efforts.*

*Three days later, May 25, 2020, police murdered George Floyd. AAPIEAG and ASAM cowrote a solidarity statement, calling out the injustice of racial violence committed by police and anti-Black and anti-Brown racism on campus and in the United States. AAPIEAG and ASAM members read it aloud at the district’s board meeting on June 2.*

*In the aftermath, the college centered its public statements and actions on addressing anti-Black racism. In several virtual college-wide meetings, Asian Americans’ concerns fell into campus disfavor. At the faculty senate on June 8, the chair of ASAM asked about the college’s plans beyond hiring an Umoja coordinator to address the moment. The interim president interpreted the question as one about non-Black minorities: “In our conversations, we have stayed very true to talking about the Black Lives Matters movement and actually talking about our Black students, faculty, staff.... That’s really where we stayed, and so if you’re asking me about every other population, we actually haven’t engaged in that.” At the same meeting, a few Asian American faculty asked about the standing request for a full-time, tenure-track counselor position to support the AAPI learning community that remained of the AANAPISI grant. A colleague responded, “For those of you who are asking about full-time positions for other groups, we need to fully support our Black community on campus because they are underserved and underrepresented. Now is not the appropriate time to ask about it.” Another added, “I believe*

*the representation of Black-centered initiatives is needed for our underrepresented and underserved population at this time” (Personal communication, June 8, 2020).*

*On June 10, at the chancellor’s office hours, the chair of ASAM pointed out the college’s trouble with connecting the dots between differently situated but interconnected racisms (i.e., anti-Black and anti-Asian). She affirmed the college’s quick shifting of resources to meet the needs of Black students and the demands made by BEAG.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, she cautioned against stoking antagonism among campus communities of color by administrators’ promoting a competitive mindset for resources. Hoping to prompt an alternative approach, she asked college executives to share their framework for understanding and undoing the interconnected racisms faced by communities of color on campus (Lee, personal communication, June 10, 2020).*

*The events of May 25, 2020, and the aftermath transformed the environment for Asian Americanist advocacy. This left AWG keen to guard against college tendencies to set minoritized groups against one other, namely the Asian American and Black communities. In November, AWG became a subcommittee of AAPIEAG: ACT. ACT had heard that BEAG members were upset with Asian Americans for writing the letter. A few ACT members were told by BEAG’s president that it was unfair to have asked one of the then presidential finalists (who later was selected and also Black-identified) about his work experience with AAPIs during the open forum because Black people come from all over, including places where there are no Asians. ACT members scheduled a meeting with BEAG to listen to their concerns, clarify the timeline of what had transpired, and establish a shared understanding of the letter.*

*When the two groups met, some senior BEAG members criticized ACT for racially targeting the new Black president with the letter and questioned their solidarity with the Black community. Others expressed a desire to work with ACT. The meeting left ACT in great distress. Despite ACT’s desire to partner with affinity groups, including BEAG, the meeting left them unsure. While ACT recognized that the most critical voices of BEAG did not represent the group, some members of ACT were inclined to defer to BEAG. Yet, as a group, ACT did not want to let go of advocating for AAPIs’ needs as they understood those to be legitimate.*

These moments shed light on the intricacies of tactically going about Asian Americanist advocacy. First, we recognized and operated within the limits of our campus power when we decided not to call for a stop to the search process. The quick turnaround to mobilize

employees left us without the wide campus support we would have needed to insist on a “redo” of the search. Thus, we wrote the letter to establish the terms of accountability for adequately serving AAPI communities. The letter put our concerns on record, drawing institutional attention to the problem, our expectations, and specific requests of the yet-to-be-named president.

Second, we confronted resistance from colleagues and administrators in a fraught moment of national racial reckoning and campus racial politics. Individual ACT members attended various college meetings and spoke up at their own will about the lack of resources for AAPI students and the dangers of a “win-lose” frame as the basis for resource allocation. ACT members sought to push the college to realize its obligation to serve multiple campus communities conscientious of their particular needs.

Third, we faced rebuke from would-be allies and pressed on for multiracial solidarity. We had to figure out how to continue advocacy without causing colleagues to feel we distracted from BLM. We grappled: Is there a “good” time for Asian Americans to raise our issues? How does Asian Americanist advocacy proceed when articulations of our needs are characterized as “hurting” another community?

During this time, anti-Asian violence was surging with the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, college leadership showed no eagerness to support Asian Americans.<sup>6</sup> Only in early 2021, with news of attacks against Asian elders did the college condemn anti-Asian violence and provide dedicated support for Asian Americans.

*Question #3: What does building a community for Asian Americanist advocacy entail?*

The labor of Asian Americanist advocacy entails creating a community of practitioners. Yet, no ready-made community necessarily exists. What does it mean to come together as Asian Americans motivated to change an organization? How does an Asian American identity cohere against disparate cross-identifications, such as ethnicity, immigrant generation, familiarity with Asian American studies, employee role, and age? And how does affiliation with Asian American identification coincide with the practice of Asian Americanist advocacy? As the authors, our respective journeys, as shown in Figure 1 and 2, speak to the broad embrace we hold for the community we are creating.

**Figure 1.** Profile of Convener of Ad Hoc Advocacy Working Group (Mae Lee)

I became *Asian American* at eighteen. I don't recall hearing that term before college in the late 1980s. Growing up on the East Coast, I was keen to my ethnic distinction in the predominantly white ethnic neighborhoods where we lived—though it evolved. I knew myself first to be *Chinese* in early school years, then *America-born Chinese* in middle school, then *Chinese American* in high school. My parents were born in China in the early 1940s, migrated to Taiwan, and came to the U.S. in the mid-1960s. My parents always managed to find a network of friends among other immigrant Chinese from Taiwan, whether in Wisconsin, where I was born, or New Jersey or New York. My Chinese American identity was a tie to family and family friends, but also my attributed reason for feeling outside the norm in other settings.

My first year in college coincided with vibrant campus activism. Contentious debates over multiculturalism had prompted Stanford University the year before to revise its required first-year "Western Civilization" curriculum and to commission a self-study on minority issues in undergraduate education. Students continued to press for changes the year I arrived, including for Asian American studies. Upper-class students—in conversations at the Asian American student center—told me about the twenty-year effort to get Asian American studies at the university, segregated Chinese student campus housing in the early 1900s, and the 1960s protests at San Francisco State. Learning this, I felt a lineage with Asian America. I resonated with new language: marginalization, race, and self-determination. I reinterpreted my earlier alienation as symptomatic of racialized experiences. I began to self-identify as *Asian American* as a political statement reflective of my new consciousness.

In the spring of my first year, my politicization was further deepened. A multiracial coalition of student activists called upon the university to meet a number of demands, such as a tenure-track position for an Asian American studies professor, a discrimination grievance board, and a full-time dean for the Chicano student center. These requests all seemed reasonable to me, so much so that I participated in a student takeover of the university president's office on May 15, 1989. Fifty-five of us were arrested. I found myself explaining our collective action in the weeks and months afterward. In a press conference, my father came to campus to defend our actions, juxtaposing Stanford's support for student demonstrators in Tiananmen, Beijing at the time with criminalization of its own student protesters.

The experience initiated me into Asian Americanist activism. It impressed upon me the importance of framing contentious issues and multiracial coalition work. It also deeply politicized my claim on Asian American identity. Years later, I headed to graduate school with one goal: to teach Asian American studies.

**Figure 2.** Profile of Convener of Advocacy Core Team (Khoa Nguyen)

I am a 30-year-old Vietnamese faculty member at NCCC and a member of AAPIEAG. I immigrated to the U.S. with my family in 2006 and began my educational journey in the U.S. at a high school in San Diego, California. I attended two predominantly white universities where I completed my bachelor's and master's degrees. At both institutions, I did not participate in any cultural clubs and did not have many Vietnamese American or Asian American friends. After my master's degree, I worked at a community college in the San Francisco Bay Area that was designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution. There, I again did not engage with the Asian community or advocate for Asian American issues.

I have never been interested in politics and don't consider myself an activist. I have steered clear of campus politics and refrained from political discussions. However, after joining my current institution, where almost 50 percent of the student body identifies as AAPI, I began to feel connected to my racial, cultural, and ethnic identities and wanted to be more involved. I joined AAPIEAG to connect with other AAPI employees and work with them to address the needs of AAPI employees and students. When there was a call for the ad hoc working group to advocate for the AAPI campus community, I decided to join. I later took charge of organizing and co-facilitating meetings for members of AWG and then ACT. This marked the start of my advocacy work. Being part of this group has solidified my interest in this work.

Although I have been working with ACT for the past eighteen months, I am still learning how best to navigate the political landscape as an employee. At times, I am unsure of what to do or what actions to take for the benefit of the group and how to best move the group forward, resulting in self-doubt about my capability to serve as a facilitator. Although this work is challenging, I am still committed to continuing to carry on with it.

The gathering of Asian American colleagues has helped me develop personally, emotionally, and professionally—from learning more about my Asian American identity, the history of Asian American studies, and the importance of advocating for my community to understanding that what I am thinking and feeling is part of the struggle that many colleagues feel. For me, joining this group has been one of the best decisions I have ever made in my professional career.

As facilitators, we have learned that Asian Americanist organizing requires labor to create a community with internal fortitude and public presence and power.

*Three days after the meeting with the chancellor, Nguyen sent an email invitation to more than 215 AAPIEAG members and campus allies to attend a Community Mapping meeting, "to continue to strategize and develop a plan of action" (Nguyen, personal communication, May 25, 2020). The chair of ASAM and Nguyen co-facilitated the meeting, inviting attendees to*



*share what they felt they wanted to contribute to the effort and what help and resources they would need to do that. The co-facilitators suggested approaches to guide the collective effort, encouraging attendees to cultivate: (1) a sense of entitlement to take up space in various campus settings; (2) a shared understanding of AAPI campus community needs, specifically in relation to the college's previous two AANAPISI grants and the development of the ASAM department; and (3) a compelling story to frame "asks" to be made of the college. Twenty-one individuals attended the meeting, and self-organized to write up the shared history, draft a welcome letter and prepare onboarding for the new president, reach out to campus allies, and communicate with student groups (Notes, May 29, 2020).*

The work of Asian Americanist advocacy has been continuous. ACT has consisted of about twenty individuals from a range of backgrounds. Coming together has required setting norms for us to share our perspectives and analyses of what we observe happening on campus in an environment that both challenges and protects us. ACT has practiced multiethnic, multigenerational collaborative learning in service of Asian Americanist advocacy work.<sup>7</sup> Forging a community based on interpersonal care and connective politics though is not without tension, which bubbled early on.

*During an AWG meeting in June 2020, there was an animated exchange between two members with different versions of a campus event. Afterward, one of the members sent an email apologizing for their interruptions during the discussion. The facilitator of AWG replied with an email speaking to the challenges of Asian Americanist advocacy work, inviting mutual care and self-awareness for the road ahead:*

*I believe we have a righteous platform. But we don't need to be self-righteous about it.... We are not in a contest with each other to see who is more "down." The beauty of this organizing effort is that it is big enough for people to enter from wherever they are. (Lee, personal communication, June 8, 2020).*

Over time, we discovered that the work of building community was not only instrumental for political cohesion but also was valued intrinsically by practitioners who treasured "being in community." Meetings have provided a space to explore what it means to be Asian American while doing campus advocacy work. This is done through sharing history of the institution and individual stories. Meetings have also provided Asian Americanist context and critique, including trainings for practitioners.

*AWG continued its advocacy work in spring of 2020 amid nationwide renewed focus on BLM. In this context, several college executives and colleagues in governance meetings communicated that AAPIs did not warrant the college's attention. In response, AWG offered trainings to help prepare members to respond to these types of comments. On June 12, there was a training on how to question zero-sum rhetoric that set the AAPI and other minoritized campus groups against the Black community. During the training, an adjunct faculty shared that it was difficult for them to challenge win-lose comments for fear that it would jeopardize their pursuit of a full-time position at the college. Another member expressed feeling torn as they wanted to advocate for both the Black and AAPI communities. After the training, an updated ASAM website included information about the history and purpose of Asian American studies, the founding of ethnic studies at the college, and ASAM campus advocacy efforts. On June 19, AWG delivered another training to members, on the history of its two AANAPISI grants.*

Meetings have welcomed members to show up as they are and contribute freely without feeling that their level of advocacy experience interferes with their ability to participate. We have also stressed the importance of “togetherness”: collectively carrying out advocacy efforts and weathering trouble as a group.

*In November 2020, after the emotionally charged meeting with BEAG, ACT members met to process what happened and discuss their reactions. Individuals agonized: How were we supposed to respond to the accusation that we had racially targeted the new Black president when we knew the letter was written before the president had been named? What did it mean to be in solidarity with our Black colleagues if they were criticizing us for hurting their community? How were we supposed to feel when told “you do not understand the Black experience”? Why did our colleagues feel comfortable chastising us as a group? Should we have reached out to them when drafting the letter? Should we just concede to all the points they made? Where do we go from here?*

After meeting with BEAG, the spirit of our advocacy did not change, but the scope of our activities did. ACT members reached out individually to BEAG members and called for meetings between affinity groups, leading to more formal coordination. Others participated in a discussion series organized by the college's ethnic studies program with the aim of strengthening multiracial alliances.

Building a community has depended on giving space to talk about our work lives, pain, and struggles. These conversations have helped us normalize our thoughts and feelings, and to see that our

individual moments of suffering are connective experiences that shape our Asian Americanist sensibility and rouse our advocacy. As practitioners, we have come to realize that in community, we are able to affirm our humanity.

*Question #4: What is the end goal of Asian Americanist advocacy?*

The fourth question requires evaluation of chosen interventions and outcomes, assessing the impact of advocacy on the institution and practitioners. As outcomes are reached and celebrated, the question remains: Have we reached the end of our Asian Americanist advocacy work?

Because the practice of Asian Americanist advocacy unfolds within the dynamics of any given institution, it is necessarily processual and nuanced. Answers hinge on evolving considerations, including the internal capacity of the advocacy community (e.g., fortitude in the face of resistance) and the degree of success in achieving outcomes (e.g., hiring an Asian Americanist college president). There is no single formula that can be used to determine whether or not our work is done. The answer to the fourth question is a decision that practitioners make together.

To be sure, our status as an AANAPISI school has lent internal legitimacy to our Asian Americanist advocacy efforts. Key longtime administrators and colleagues who were involved in previous AANAPISI grants recognize that AAPI students do have particular needs that warrant tailored resources. In part because of this institutional history, we have succeeded in numerous transactional “wins,” such as:

- College approval of two full-time, tenure-track faculty positions: one in ASAM and one for the AAPI cohort-based learning community;
- New voting seats on shared governance committees, including a college budget team and the president’s advisory council;
- Seats on the core team charged with advising the AANAPISI grant application, along with a college commitment to apply for a third grant;
- College-organized psychological services for students in response to anti-Asian violence during the pandemic;
- A college-produced educational video series about anti-Asian racism;
- A presidential letter to the campus the week of Lunar New Year acknowledging anti-Asian violence and planned college actions;

- A panel discussion organized by the college's Office of Equity on the national and local histories of anti-Asian racism;
- A college-promoted, five-week multiracial panel discussion series organized by the ethnic studies program; and
- An offer of \$10,000 by the president for AAPI-related initiatives.

These are all good and important achievements as they give greater prominence to Asian Americanist voices in college decision-making, involve Asian Americans in multiracial collaborations, and provide more resources to meet AAPI students' needs. And yet, despite these "wins," ACT members still feel dissatisfied because college executives have not evidenced a capacity to generate their own insight into the needs and predicaments of AAPIs. All the "wins," except the \$10,000 offer, have resulted from Asian Americanist advocates having a hand in making them happen.

*In early June 2020, AWG sent a welcome letter to the new college president and expressed their desire to collaborate in support of AAPI campus communities. The letter requested a first meeting in July, and quarterly meetings thereafter. Three days later, the president indicated he would be scheduling a meeting soon. AWG suggested a few dates in July; however, an August meeting was the soonest available. AWG learned soon after about other campus groups' meetings with the president in July whose requests were made after AWG's. Additionally, what had originally been scheduled as a ninety-minute meeting was shortened to fifty minutes, until AWG pushed back. This initial exchange raised a flag for some AWG members, signaling possibly where Asian Americans fell in the hierarchy of priorities.*

*In August 2020, AWG met with the college president for the first time with the goal to build a working relationship and establish trust. They expressed their willingness to work with the president and assured him, "Your success is our success." They explained that there was no stable college infrastructure that provided tailored institutional support for AAPI students, faculty, and staff. They reinforced their longer-term goals: (1) to facilitate informed decision-making by college executives that kept in mind the needs of AAPIs; (2) to advocate for programs and institutional efforts to promote access, retention, and success of AAPI students, including the existing AAPI learning community and application for a third AANAPISI grant; (3) to collaborate with the president to establish mentorship and leadership programs for AAPI students and employees; and (4) to help establish a task force to study the state of AAPI employees and disproportionately impacted student groups.*

*At this first meeting, AWG's only "asks" were for an ongoing relationship with the president and for his familiarization with AAPI histories and communities on and off campus. The group had hoped that a collegial working relationship would yield empathy for the struggles of AAPI communities and thus motivate the president's actions. After, AWG followed up with a thank you email, also requesting future meetings and providing a resource list of campus and local AAPI groups. The list included a short bibliography of readings on AANAPISIs; Southeast Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students; the model minority idea; and best practices for working with AAPI communities. The hope was that the president would develop his knowledge base to best serve these communities. The president did not reply to this email.*

*In December 2020, ACT and AAPIEAG had a second meeting with the president, during which he made a surprise offer of \$10,000 and requested submission of proposals for use of the money. This gesture was not what they had asked for or expected. Rather, they had wanted college executives to learn more about AAPI campus communities to better integrate consideration of them into decisions about college priorities. The request for proposals left AAPIEAG scrambling to come up with a deadline and rubric for selecting proposals. The president's unsolicited offer ended up consuming more of AAPIEAG's time and energy.*

One year and a half later, ACT is assessing our impact on the college. While we have achieved much, we realize that the organization has not changed in any fundamental way. Much of what has been achieved is the product of our advocacy. This signals to us that if we were to stop now, the college would likely not be able to generate its own insight on the needs of AAPIs and take action accordingly.

We have not reached our goal of transforming the college so that college executives have the capacity to think about how best to support AAPIs. Systems thinking literature is helpful here, though our group did not begin its work with academic thinking about a model for change. Our mobilization was a reaction to an unexpected situation that we felt required immediate action. Evaluation of our work's impact has been largely a self-revealing process of figuring out how we feel about what we have done and where the college is at any given point.

By serendipitously coming across systems thinking literature, we are able to introduce an explicit model of organizational change to our work. "Systems change is about 'shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place'" and imagines three levels of interdependent conditions that activists and organizational leaders can target for change (Kania et al., 2018, 3). According to the model, our efforts have been

able to effect structural change—alterations at the *explicit level* of systems change. That is, we have shifted college policies, practices, and resource flows. To some extent, our advocacy has also resulted in systems change at the *semi-explicit level*—“the relationships between people who make up the system” and dynamics of power (ibid., 7). We have inserted Asian Americanist advocates into college social networks and decision-making bodies, influencing at times the interplay of power on campus. The one area where it appears we have not succeeded is systems change at the *implicit level*—the mental models or the habits of thinking and social narratives that prevail within an organization (ibid., 8–9). We have yet to hear a college discourse in which Asian Americans are regularly and insightfully discussed by college executives and colleagues. We recognize that without challenging campus discourse on Asian Americans the permanence of our work to date may be short-lived.

Our collective answer to the fourth question is: there is still work to be done, and in a new direction. Group members are now brainstorming ways to change the campus culture to shape how college executives and peers think and feel about AAPIs. We will regard our college transformed when it can articulate and address the needs and predicaments of AAPIs. Even then, our advocacy might not end.

### **THE UNFINISHED AND IMPROVISATIONAL WORK OF ASIAN AMERICANIST ADVOCACY**

Would the need for Asian Americanist advocacy disappear if a strong Asian Americanist advocate appeared in the college’s executive ranks? After all, scholars and organizations have stressed cultivating a pool of Asian American college executives (Izumi and Kalima, 2021; LEAP, n.d.; Prinster, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2009, 64–65). This is not a hypothetical question for us.

At this moment, there is an open senior administrator position. Even if it is filled by an Asian American or Pacific Islander who endeavors to hold the institution accountable for addressing the needs of AAPIs, we are still uncertain that our advocacy would cease. Based on our experience and scholarship, Asian Americans in high-level positions face challenges of being hemmed in by racialized presumptions, including questions about their ability to “represent everyone” rather than “special interests” (Burris et al., 2013; Chin, 2020; Hu, 2019). For this reason, we believe our active and strategic support would benefit any new Asian Americanist champion. Might there be an end point to American Americanist advocacy? For now, our work carries on.

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We thank our dear colleagues at NCCC whose care and daring inspire our collective advocacy efforts.

## NOTES

1. Stop AAPI Hate has been the primary tracking site of anti-Asian harassment, discrimination, and violence in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. The organization has released regular reports, widely cited in news and social media. Its first report, for March 19–25, indicated 673 incidents of “anti-Asian hate.” Its one-month report, for March 19–April 15, 2020, cited 1,497 incidents. For March 19, 2020–March 31, 2021, it reported 6,603 incidents with an increase from 3,795 to 6,603 in the month of March 2021 alone. <https://stopaapihate.org/reports/> (accessed June 1, 2021).
2. We focus on Asian Americans in this essay based on the case study we discuss and given that we do not examine the particularities of advocacy work done by self-organized Pacific Islanders. We do refer to Pacific Islanders when specific activities described in the case study involved or referred to the group explicitly or substantively. Also, we refer to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at times as a single community when no operative differentiation is significant to the discussion and at other times as plural communities when such distinctions are pertinent to the context.
3. We refer to the college by the pseudonym Northern California Community College: NCCC.
4. Ethnographically speaking, individuals engaged in Asian Americanist advocacy in our case study explicitly describe our collective work as “advocacy” and rarely as “activism.”
5. BEAG’s demands were (1) a full-time, tenure-track Umoja counselor; (2) support, visibility, and a safe physical space for Black students; (3) a Black Student Union; (4) budgetary support for all programs directly affecting Black students; (5) securing a prominent speaker for college opening day; (6) recruitment of Black students, staff, and faculty; (7) more opportunities for professional development for Black staff; and (8) support for Black studies.
6. From March 2020 until February 2021, the college did not provide campus messages condemning COVID-19-related anti-Asian violence and discrimination or coordinated services to support Asian American students. The college also fell short on maintaining clear communication to international students, mostly from Asian countries, who worried about the Department of Homeland Security/Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s rule published on July 6, 2020, that required international

students not taking in-person classes to depart the country. Additionally, ASAM's request for assistance with creating a survey to collect data on students' incidents with pandemic-related racism was not prioritized. There was also a lack of timely response from the college after the mass shooting in Atlanta, with no message addressing its potential impact on Asian American faculty, staff, and students. Actions taken by college leadership to address anti-Asian racism have often been delayed and more public facing than substantive. The burden of coming up with concrete activities to support Asian American campus communities have largely fallen on the shoulders of Asian American faculty and staff.

7. The members of ACT include four full-time, two adjunct, and six counseling faculty; three faculty directors; a dean of an academic division; and four classified professionals including a retiree. Five of the six faculty have taught Asian American studies and another seven members have taken Asian American studies. Of the fifteen faculty, five were tenured when our efforts began in May 2020. Six more were tenured between July 2020 and July 2021. Ethnic self-identification of members include: six Chinese Americans (two immigrant, four U.S.-born), five Filipinx Americans (two immigrant, three U.S.-born), three Korean Americans (two immigrant and one U.S.-born, including one biracially identified), two Vietnamese Americans (one immigrant, one U.S.-born), one U.S.-born Lao/Thai American, one Okinawan Hawaiian Chinese American, one Issei, and one Sansei.

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