

Research Article

Building a Culture of Care: The Development of an Ethnic Studies Faculty Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

There has been growing interest in Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) as a tool to build community and increase teaching effectiveness for faculty in institutions of higher education. This paper seeks to understand qualitatively the impact of an Ethnic Studies FLC on increasing faculty capacity to improve pedagogy and better serve undergraduates who are first-generation, low-income, or come from underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander groups. Qualitative approaches were used including open-ended comments from surveys (n=50), focus group (n=8), and in-depth interviews (n=10) collected between 2018-22. Results from these interviews include the following themes: expanding faculty capacity to support students holistically, developing pedagogies of care in the classroom, and creating spaces for faculty to thrive and cultivate community.

INTRODUCTION

“On Strike! Shut it Down!”

—Black Student Union & Third World Liberation Front, 1968

Fifty years ago, San Francisco State College (now University, SFSU) held the longest student strike in the nation. Led by the Black Student Union, and later the multiracial coalition of the Third World Liberation

Front, students and community members fought for representation within the student population, faculty, and staff as well as relevant curriculum across all age groups in California. In the end, the strike built the first College of Ethnic Studies at SFSU and spurred other student movements for Ethnic Studies across the nation. As a testament to the importance and growth of Ethnic Studies, in 2018, the state passed Assembly Bill 2016 and began developing an Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum to be used as a guide for districts or schools that want to develop their Ethnic Studies courses and curriculum. Additionally, in 2020, Assembly Bill 1460 (AB 1460) was signed into effect for the California State University (CSU) system to require Ethnic Studies courses at each of its campuses as an undergraduate requirement for all students. In both bills, there is a focus on four historically defined racialized groups: Black, Indigenous, Asian American, and Latinx communities.

Despite the passage of such legislation, however, Ethnic Studies is often framed as divisive or exclusionary—resulting in pressures to whitewash and water down content and programs. When juxtaposing such realities with the high class loads, large classes, and the lack of faculty development support at large public universities, we can see how Ethnic Studies faculty may face additional pressures such as emotional exhaustion and burnout: Ethnic Studies teachers unpack historical trauma, analyze oppression in real life experiences, and hold space with students. Ergo, there is a need to develop resources such as a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) specifically for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AA&PIs), which uphold a space for healing, connection, support, and a sense of belonging for the teachers who do this vital work.

This article's examination of the Asian American and Pacific Islander Retention and Education (ASPIRE) FLC teacher experiences sheds light on cultural counter-spaces that support AA&PIs to pursue higher levels of education and enter positions of teaching and leadership (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2010; Yosso, 2005). Teaching and learning Ethnic Studies should not rest solely on those teaching in Ethnic Studies—the entire university should carry the purpose and meaning of transforming the world and centering the lives of those who are consistently pushed to the margins. As universities implement more Ethnic Studies programs and curriculum through AB 1460, this paper aims to understand the impact of the ASPIRE FLC on supporting and increasing the capacity of faculty to better serve undergraduate students who are Asian American, Pacific Islander, first-generation, and low-income.

HISTORY OF THE ASPIRE FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITY

In Fall 2016, Dr. Grace Yoo and Dr. Arlene Daus-Magbual developed a plan to launch SFSU's first AA&PI FLC, Student Learning Community, and Peer Mentor program. The FLC curriculum developed by Dr. Daus-Magbual and Dr. Yoo is rooted in the Ethnic Studies founding principles of Access, Relevance, and Community; critical pedagogy; and liberatory education. We wanted to create a space for faculty members to engage in their pedagogical purpose, reflect on their funds of knowledge, and add to their work in community with other faculty members. In creating our curriculum, we prioritized centering the voices and experiences of AA&PI educators and students, utilizing four pillars that frame learning outcomes for both faculty and students: (1) Purpose, (2) Pedagogy, (3) Pathway, and (4) Praxis. Since AB 1460 requires all campuses offer lower-division Ethnic Studies courses, we wanted to ensure that SFSU teachers were prepared to respond to the needs of students and the overall purpose of Ethnic Studies. In the following, we describe the four pillars as a framework of our ASPIRE FLC curriculum and their implementation in the classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of the ASPIRE FLC is to create a critical space of teaching and learning with AA&PI tenured, tenure-track, and lecturer faculty. ASPIRE FLC provides support with teaching philosophies that examine the context of and purpose for their teaching, breaking the individualism and isolation that is abundant in higher education. We do this using *barangay* (community) pedagogy (Daus-Magbual et al., 2019)—whereby faculty work collaboratively both inside and outside the classroom, creating an intentional space for the ASPIRE FLC to connect and co-create knowledge—thereby challenging traditional models of teaching, learning, and engagement.

Pedagogy

ASPIRE centers liberatory education through critical pedagogy. It is important to understand who our students are, what they need, and how we create spaces for them to reimagine the world with self-determination and community collaboration. As discussed by Paulo Friere (1970), liberatory education focuses on the development of critical consciousness, which enables learners to recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social

contexts in which they are embedded. While building services for AA&PI students, it was important for us to include our faculty in the process of examining, interpreting, and envisioning what Freire calls a student-teacher, teacher-student relationship. We understood that our faculty members needed support as much as they had given support to our students.

Pathway

ASPIRE FLC builds a cohort model of tenure-track faculty, faculty lecturers, and peer mentors each year, which helps in developing a meaningful relationship as a team. The humanizing of both teachers and students opens a pathway to creating long-lasting relationships. This mentorship opens the possibilities of self-determination and radical love with an Ethnic Studies lens.

Praxis

Taking an Ethnic Studies class brings new awareness to a critical consciousness, or what Freire (1970) calls *conscientization*. The necessary first step of “praxis” is an ongoing, reflective approach to action. Praxis involves engaging in a cycle of theory, application, and reflection as a cyclical process. Social transformation is the product of praxis at the collective level. Praxis in ASPIRE FLC is a process of understanding critical theory as well as how faculty can apply this theory to their teaching philosophy, syllabi, lesson plans, study circles, and peer mentor engagement. This encourages faculty to continually reflect on their teaching praxis so that they constantly seek ways to better serve and support their students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research suggests that FLCs build community and increase teaching engagement for faculty in institutions of higher education, thereby improving student retention and graduation. Milton D. Cox identifies two categories of FLCs: cohort-based and topic-based. Cohort-based FLCs “address the teaching, learning, and developmental needs of an important group of faculty or staff that has been particularly affected by the isolation, fragmentation, stress, neglect, or chilly climate in the academy” (Cox, 2004, 8). Topic-based FLC curriculum is designed around a specific need, issue, or opportunity (Cox, 2002). The goals of FLCs in general strive to “build community, increase interest in teaching and learning, increase collaboration across disciplines and create

awareness of the complexity of teaching as a practice” (Malik, 2012, 29). The development of FLCs stems from the goals and practices of Student Learning Communities, which are highly effective in helping students find a sense of community in higher education (Meiklejohn, 2001); engage in deeper, more integrated, and more complex levels of learning (MacGregor, et al., 2001); and attain higher academic achievement (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). Similar effects on students’ academic success have been observed with the implementation of FLCs (Cox, 2004).

MaryJo Banasik and J. Dean maintain that FLCs may be particularly useful for non-tenure-track faculty who experience isolation and lack support in their institutions to “enhance[e] their working conditions, performance and the quality of undergraduate education” (2016, 333). Similarly, Nathan Bond (2015) found that universities are increasingly using FLCs as professional development for their non-tenure-track faculty. In his case study, Bond found that “the [non-tenure-track] participants learned useful instructional strategies and felt more connected to their colleagues, more supported by the university, and more confident in their teaching” (2005, 1). These findings support the notion that FLCs can be useful sources of support and community for faculty in all stages of their academic career.

The implementation of FLCs for the promotion of more culturally diverse and inclusive teaching and learning perspectives is of particular interest. Faculty who participated in FLCs that target increasing cultural awareness, diversity, and intersectionality have expressed changes in their teaching perspectives, curricula, and feeling a greater sense of community at their institutions (Alejano-Steele, et al., 2011; Petrone, 2004). Research suggests that the use of FLCs to explore culturally inclusive pedagogies may be effective in contributing to closing the achievement gap between majority students and those who are underrepresented and/or marginalized (Anderson, et al., 2014).

While there is discussion of using learning communities to explore and include the cultural experiences and identities of Latinx (Flores, Clark, Claeys, and Villareal, 2007; Ortiz, 2000; Lisagor, Augustine, Lucero-Liu, and Efrat, 2013) and Black (Shapiro, 2008; Wood and Ireland, 2014; Taylor, Bernhard, Garg, Cummins, 2008) students and faculty, no literature nor case studies exist on the implementation or impact of learning communities for AA&PI students and faculty. Thus, our data contribute to the growing body of research on FLCs by specifically focusing on AA&PI pedagogical experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This paper asks the following question: How has an Ethnic Studies FLC increased faculty capacity to improve pedagogy and better serve undergraduates who may be first-generation, low-income, or come from an underrepresented AA&PI group? Over a five-year period (2017-22), both quantitative and qualitative formative and summative assessments were conducted with faculty participants each semester. In the qualitative assessments, the key questions included investigation of how faculty developed responsive teaching practices and how this may have increased their capacity to serve first-generation, low-income, or underrepresented students. Each semester, ten faculty participated in an ASPIRE FLC, with a total of twenty-one faculty participants. Over a five-year period, there were ten different FLCs and fifty semester assessments were collected. To also understand aspects of the role of an Ethnic Studies FLC in faculty development, we analyzed qualitative data from the following sources:

- Open-ended responses from the ASPIRE FLC Assessment from each semester from 2017-22 (n=50 responses from twenty-one faculty participants).
- ASPIRE FLC Focus group data with fourteen participants.
- ASPIRE FLC in-depth interviews with ten participants.

Both open-ended responses from assessments and transcripts from focus groups and interviews were examined using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory uncovers relevant conditions and processes through an open-ended coding process. For qualitative data analysis, each researcher independently reviewed interview transcripts for commonalities and differences. Transcripts were independently coded for themes that appeared repeatedly in the text, and refinements were made between the investigators until consensus was reached on the description and definition of each code. Please note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the FLC moved to a remote online community in 2020-22.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Of the twenty-one faculty participants, seventeen were lecturers, and the remaining were tenure-line faculty members. In the following section, we discuss our findings and analysis from qualitative data from the focus groups, interviews, and surveys that suggest ASPIRE FLC expanded faculty capacity to support students holistically, developed pedagogies of care in the classroom, and created spaces for faculty to thrive and cultivate community.

1. Expanding Faculty Capacity to Support Students Holistically

Positioned within one of the nation's most expensive areas to live, Bay Area students face additional challenges that can affect their academic success such as lack of financial aid, increased cost of housing, and immigration issues. A key theme from interviews is that the ASPIRE FLC expanded faculty's capacity to support students holistically. This increased faculty capacity meant expanding what it means to teach: rather than solely teaching the content, faculty first take in their purpose in teaching Ethnic Studies, then relate the content to the context of our students.

To center the lives and experiences of our students, we encourage thinking outside of the content and responding to the needs of the various students in the classroom. With this in mind, we created curriculum and invited guest speakers to train our ASPIRE FLC on the following topics during our monthly meetings throughout the school year:

1. Creating teaching philosophies grounded in Ethnic Studies Principles, Cultural and Community Responsive Pedagogy
2. Critical Pedagogy in Action
3. The legacy of Ethnic Studies
4. Building a classroom community
5. Addressing learning differences and mental health in the AA&PI community
6. Connecting students to relevant campus resources
7. How to support and engage Pacific Islander students
8. How to address grief in the classroom
9. Pedagogical practices of engagement
10. Critical Disability Studies
11. Anti-Asian Violence
12. Health and wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic

After each semester, we consulted our FLC and added more topics to the list according to faculty experience in the classrooms and their recommendations. During the Fall 2019 faculty focus group, Dr. Daus-Magbual, the AA&PI Student Services Director and fellow lecturer faculty at the time, posed the questions "What can we do to support our lecturers who are on the grind every day? What can we do to build that community so we can breathe?" Her questions, and participants' reflections, show awareness that ASPIRE's programming is

beneficial not just for AA&PI students, but also for AA&PI lecturer faculty as well:

ASPIRE inspires such a great model for community collaboration in academia. The faculty learning community and the interactions with the peer mentors is something that then kind of gets kind of automatically replicated in the ASPIRE linked courses. There is a lot of seeing the student as a whole person, not just as an academic subject or just as a student, as well as encouraging them to kind of explore their own identities.

—End of semester interview participant, Fall 2019

Participants also responded by highlighting how the ASPIRE FLC serves as a space for non-tenure-track faculty to build community and professional development. This directly challenges the individualism and isolation that is embedded into the structure of the ivory tower.

Scaffolding Professional and Empathetic Support for Students

In addition to encouraging students' academic success, the ASPIRE FLC program works to impact their non-cognitive skills (Borghans, Meijers, and Ter Weel, 2008; Bloom 1964 as cited in Garcia, 2016). Broadly, these skills encompass those traits that are not directly represented by cognitive skills or by formal conceptual understanding, but instead by socio-emotional or behavioral characteristics that are not fixed traits of the personality and are linked to the educational process—either by being nurtured in the school years or by contributing to the development of cognitive skills in those years (or both). Building essential skills such as self-determination, perseverance, interpersonal interactions, teamwork, and a critical consciousness help students navigate their university experience and contribute meaningfully to their communities, families, and workplaces.

ASPIRE FLC trainings and workshops addressed strategies for coping with grief, engaging student participation, and reflective contemplative practices that contributed to faculty's increased capacity to build students' non-cognitive skills. Our FLC was able to fill a gap in faculty development that is growing as universities increasingly hire faculty lecturers who are stretched thin, often working at multiple institutions with limited access to any professional development, if any. A participant stated,

I think every year or semester, [professional development] has gotten more into the practical application which I appreciate. The

tone of coming to the ASPIRE FLC is more community-focused, easy, supportive, loving, and light. [It] is helpful for faculty.”

—End of semester focus group participant, Fall 2019

As opposed to a one-time professional development opportunity that focuses on deficits in the educator’s skills, our ASPIRE FLC provided an ongoing community of praxis where collective growth in a supportive environment was central. Faculty appreciated the opportunities to understand, develop, and implement humanizing pedagogy through a critical examination of how experiences outside of the classroom impact their students and themselves as educators. One participant mentioned:

The trainings I have attended as a part of the ASPIRE AAS Faculty Learning Community exposed me to different pedagogical techniques and strategies to better incorporate the ASPIRE program in my classroom. The use of cultural energizers, flashcards, name tents, and recommendations for mnemonic devices to remember not only the faces and names of students, but also their stories, come to mind.

—End of semester self-assessment survey response, Spring 2019

During the March 2019 workshop “Attending to Grief in the Classroom,” for example, faculty were asked to reflect on the impact of grief in their own lives and the lives of their students, as well as to identify various assignments that would allow students to work through grief and loss in the classroom. The intention of the workshop was to provide faculty with concrete practices on coping with grief to share with students and build their non-cognitive skills. Two other professional development workshops that had a significant impact on our faculty were the Pacific Island Studies training and Writing Pedagogies workshop.

The Pacific Island Studies workshop helped our lecturer faculty understand ways to better support our students and to also be more intentional in our pedagogical praxis. One participant stated,

I love the notion of “our sea of islands,” decentering the importance of land, highlighting interconnectedness w/o erasing the islands themselves. I also loved the discussion on honoring our unknowns & gaps in knowledge while explaining our intentions.

—Response from workshop on supporting PI students,
January 2018

Faculty expanded their capacity to support the diversity of their students by seeing ways to reframe their pedagogy and incorporate new stories, histories, and epistemologies. Another participant stated that the Pacific Island Studies workshop “makes me rethink what ‘inclusivity’ looks like in the classroom, as well as the dangers of canonization in an interdisciplinary field” (End of semester self-assessment survey response, Spring 2019).

This helps illustrate the power of these workshops: not only were they rooted in issues that directly impact the students we serve, but they also included critical approaches that teachers can reflect on and apply. One writing workshop participant noted how the FLC workshop impacted the way they teach writing:

Scaffolding that comes out of here has been really important. It allows us to teach more ambitious things. A lot of the exercises we do (writing a sentence) then building them longer and longer. Instead of writing out of your head (textual analysis), you have something to say, and these are some tools in which you can express that.

—Response from writing workshop, Fall 2019

Supporting our students holistically became a responsive practice for our FLC as we relate the content to the context of our students. We wanted to make sure we centered their lives and experiences in our pedagogical approaches in and outside of the classroom.

Constructively Challenging Our Pedagogy

Another important aspect of the workshops was that they were rooted in Ethnic Studies; oftentimes, in other professional development spaces, the focus is narrowly on content and/or method. But our workshops asked participants to go deeper, which some expressed gratitude for:

We’re writing together. This has helped me as a writer too. My challenge in terms of Critical Pedagogy is trying to challenge theories on writing/reading because there are so many ways to write and read. There are so many ways to read the world. We’re creating those resources to show that reading and writing isn’t these standardized things.

—End of semester focus group response, Fall 2019

Workshops went beyond just teaching writing, but also included challenging our own biases around what writing looks like. This is

what sets our workshops apart. We challenged our participants to see teaching students to write as more than just teaching writing. One participant stated that, “I have been able to incorporate aspects of writing tools and exercises for my students. Also bringing in aspects to help develop emotional intelligence and reflective skills have also helped my students grow as people” (End of semester self-assessment response, Spring 2019). Ethnic Studies and critical pedagogy expand our FLC’s purpose in teaching and learning, creating a foundation for teachers to apply it in their own lives and in the classroom.

2. Developing Pedagogies of Care in the Classroom

A key theme of the ASPIRE FLC was helping faculty develop pedagogies of care in the classroom. In developing ASPIRE, liberatory education was central and influenced by critical pedagogy, Ethnic Studies pedagogy, and community responsive education. It is important to understand who our students are, what they need, and how we create spaces for our students to reimagine the world with self-determination and community collaboration.

Rooting Our Praxis in Purpose: Being Intentional with Our Teaching Philosophies

Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015) state that Ethnic Studies pedagogy is directly connected to the purpose, context, and content of what is being taught where the goal of community responsiveness is central. Dr. Allyson Tintinagco-Cubales facilitated one of our first FLC professional developments and guided our teachers on how to write a teaching philosophy that is critical, culturally relevant, and community responsive. Writing a teaching philosophy grounded us in our purpose and guided us as we navigated the school year. A faculty member shared:

Having drafted a teaching statement was powerful and however iterative it is year to year; I am mindful now in executing it in action and intent. I have utilized some approaches from my fellow ASPIRE colleagues that have shared their resources, methods, and assignments/activities with us during the learning community.

—End of semester interview response, Spring 2020

As much as faculty are expected to support students, we recognize our faculty members need support as well. The learning community meetings were intentionally organized to show care to participating

faculty: this was done by including a Heart Check Question¹ at each meeting, then following with professional development and sharing of resources and tools by other members of faculty in the community. This space kept faculty accountable in making sure we narrow the distance between what we say and do.

Several faculty noted that the community meetings modeled this pedagogy of care, which made it easier to do the same in their classrooms. Respondents encouraged the building of relationships and connections between and among the program's students and instructors through various mechanisms, including having instructors meet with each student in the class. One participant shared that they found reassurance in the FLC. They stated that "taking the time to build community with my students in creative ways to support their mental health during this semester was of the utmost importance" (End of semester self-assessment response, Spring 2019).

Providing a Humanizing and Collaborative Environment for Lecturer Faculty

For participants, the FLC provided a humanizing space for teachers to learn from one another, express their challenges and triumphs in the classroom, and celebrate each other's successes. ASPIRE's FLC provided faculty with tools, resources, and training that enabled them to holistically support their students and help them succeed both in and outside the classroom. One faculty member stated:

ASPIRE has destigmatized caring as a faculty member and has allowed me to be more personal with my students and express more vulnerability because it's a model that ASPIRE and other ASPIRE participants have demonstrated to me. I really appreciate that ASPIRE values the whole person for both students and faculty.

—End of semester focus group response, Fall 2019

ASPIRE FLC participants expressed that increased capacity to support students with non-cognitive skills, such as interpersonal communication and collaboration, allowed for not only their students' success within the academic setting, but also related to their success in navigating the world outside the university. In addition to expanding faculty's capacity to support students holistically, respondents most frequently discussed how the community increased their ability to develop pedagogies of care in the classroom.

The ways that ASPIRE has developed pedagogies of care have been through various approaches, including:

- Providing students with name tents;
- Asking Heart Check Questions in the beginning of each class;
- Encouraging Classroom collaboration through technology;
- Requiring an ASPIRE event in the syllabus;
- Holding one-on-one meeting with professors and peer mentors;
- Attending study circles hosted by ASPIRE peer mentors; and
- Building relationships with ASPIRE peer mentors.

Interview subjects felt that the value ASPIRE placed on pedagogies of care made the program exceptional, and those who participated in the program—faculty and students alike—benefitted from the care-driven approach. By modeling a culture of care in the FLC, ASPIRE works to center caring relationships among students and faculty.

Care from the FLC to the Classroom

Fostering such relationships transforms the hierarchical roles between these groups, enabling them to grow, teach, and learn collaboratively. ASPIRE FLC emphasized the need for faculty to connect with and advocate for students in their classrooms. The FLC raised awareness among faculty of the challenges that first-generation college attendees, low-income, or high-need students face as they juggle college and financial, personal, housing, and immigration issues that may come along with their coursework. A faculty participant stated in their interview their “role isn’t just to teach, and it will never be to just teach, but it also expands into different domains of care . . . I think, with ASPIRE, it’s made me also become more naturally equipped to handle that part of the job too” (End of semester interview, Spring 2020).

As a result of their participation, another faculty discussed how they were now creating more “student-centered” classes as opposed to the “old school” practice of teaching with a “teacher-centered” approach that usually prioritized grading, then administrative work, and then lastly, student needs. This faculty, in their open-ended comment from the assessment survey, stated:

I am spending more time in and out of class listening to, guiding, and building relationships with our students. I am consciously challenging myself to break out of the “banking model” of schooling that I’ve been accustomed to, and creating more project-based and hands-on in-class exercises to make the learning more

meaningful, relevant, and fun for all of us. I am taking more classroom time to talk about diversity of learning approaches, how my assignments and assessments are tied to our course learning objectives, and what MY TEACHING GOALS ARE to be as fully transparent and HUMAN as I can be with the students.

—End of semester interview, Spring 2020

As evidenced by this comment, the development of pedagogies of care was demonstratively modeled in the learning community. The direct and essential connection between the community and “belongingness” they experienced played a role in understanding the importance of care and translating that to their classrooms.

3. Cultivating a Critical Community

The purpose of the ASPIRE FLC is to create a critical space of teaching and learning with Asian American and Pacific Islander tenure-track faculty and faculty lecturers. ASPIRE FLC provides support with teaching philosophies that examine the context of and purpose for their teaching, combatting the individualism and isolation abundant in higher education which also presented difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. We do this using barangay pedagogy, by which faculty work collaboratively both inside and outside the classroom. Daus-Magbual et al. (2019, 98) state,

Our belief and practice of justice allowed our barangay to find hope through our strengths, weaknesses, talents, personalities, and egos to reach an accord . . . Despite the challenges it took to navigate through the barangay building process, the catharsis that brought our group to understanding was achieved through our practices of humanization and seeing the hope in one another.

Creating an intentional space for the ASPIRE FLC to connect and co-create knowledge went against the traditional models of teaching not solely as individuals, but instead as a collective whole.

Through busy schedules and teaching at multiple colleges and universities as faculty lecturers, it can be easy to work alone and in isolation as we build our curriculum, lesson plans, projects, and assignments. The ASPIRE FLC allowed for a community to form. As one participant noted in their 2020 end of semester interview, “Being part of the ASPIRE faculty learning community as a novice professor allowed me to be in a space with veteran professors of Asian American studies.” ASPIRE FLC builds a cohort model of tenure-track faculty and faculty lecturers each

year to help in developing a meaningful relationship as a team. Another participant expressed, “Having a group of predominantly lecturers to share experiences and establish and share innovative learning pedagogies has been fantastic like I belong at the university, and has been a great support system for me” (End of semester interview, Spring 2020).

The ASPIRE FLC worked to transform a faculty learning environment from an isolated institutional setting to a connected community; this effort was even more significant as the FLC meetings also took place during the pandemic and during anti-Asian hate and anti-Blackness in our own communities. Instructors had to rapidly transition to remote learning and adapt to student needs as well as their own. As a result, the FLC played an important role in creating a community for instructors that supported the development of others. Being in dialogue with other FLC participants, faculty felt they had more confidence to navigate difficult conversations. One participant expressed:

I am grateful for the conversations that we have engaged in regarding anti-Asian violence and the Movement for Black Lives. This dialogue enabled me to have more confidence and courage as I engaged my own students in discussions of racial violence.

—End of semester focus group, Fall 2019

While our ASPIRE FLCs flourished and evolved, our students and fellow faculty members were starting to notice the changes in ourselves as teachers and within our students. So, when COVID-19 shut down the entire campus, we were worried that the community building that happened in person with our ASPIRE community could not be replicated online. We continued with our ASPIRE FLC meetings, trainings, and check-ins. A participant said:

ASPIRE provided a space to connect, to voice worries, to be listened, but also share online teaching strategies and approaches. I really felt that the ASPIRE community was really way ahead in providing personal and academic support, so I was better equipped for teaching online.

—End of semester interview, Spring 2020

ASPIRE worked hard to provide the necessary resources faculty needed to teach online and to continue cultivating a community with each other and our students. Through the heightened fear of COVID-19 and not knowing when we would physically be back in the classroom, the ASPIRE FLC needed a space to be themselves, and to hold space

for important dialogues on our own health and wellness during the pandemic. A participant shared:

Even though we were not physically together this semester, I felt physically held in the ASPIRE community. I also felt very held by students through their joyous energy and patience through a difficult fall semester.

—End of semester interview, Spring 2020

Being a faculty member or lecturer faculty can be very isolating, and COVID-19 further isolated us from our communities with no return date in sight. ASPIRE breaks the isolation in teaching and creates a community where knowledge and praxis are shared and participants are encouraged to create multiple perspectives in teaching, learning, and engagement in and outside of our classrooms, even during a global pandemic. The ASPIRE FLC provided support during this most difficult time through professional support in virtual teaching technology, pedagogical support, emotional/psychological therapy, building meaningful and productive digital community amidst the reality of physical and human alienation resulting from social distancing, and digital collegiality. ASPIRE FLC modeled what a critical Ethnic Studies classroom can look like: a place where we recognize our teachers' and students' holistic selves, where we can create and sustain a pedagogy of care and cultivate a critical community in and outside of the classroom.

Taking an Ethnic Studies class brings new awareness to a critical consciousness and encourages faculty to continually reflect on their teaching praxis so that they are constantly seeking ways to better serve and support themselves, each other, and our students. A participant expressed:

It's empowering to be amongst colleagues who are talking about the kinds of things you talk about, who share the same vision as you . . . using education as a tool for liberation, self-determination, and a transformative education that empowers students to fight for their community. Education for social and political justice—that is an education that is instilled amongst ASPIRE, within ASPIRE.

—End of semester focus group response, Fall 2019

“Cultivating a community” was a recurring theme in our data. The ASPIRE FLC served as a model for the university because it emphasized building a space that is grounded in Access, Relevance, Community—the founding principles of Ethnic Studies. Our

classrooms focused on community building, connecting the subject with our lived experiences, and modeling that culturally relevant and community-responsive classrooms and communities exist. A participant expressed:

We're in the moment where what we're doing is quite relevant. It's a motivation to go to work to bring your creativity and energy to bring this to unfold. In a different sense, we are essential to people's well-being . . . We give them connection. It's not just one way—if we're giving them connection, we're giving ourselves connections. Our classrooms are unique. Even within the university, we have a real community with our college and our community.

—End of semester interview, Spring 2020

Our students and faculty bring their own cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and represent diverse communities. However, while we model what a critical classroom can look like, we are still beholden to an institution that continues to uphold white supremacy. Our hopes for our ASPIRE FLC were to address and interrogate systems of educational oppression and create spaces that can support, mentor, and love both our teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

Community spaces for faculty to come together must also include ways for faculty to undergo the same process as their students in the classroom . . . Faculty must go through the same process of unlearning, learning, relearning, reflection and evaluation, in order for them to be teachers that work for social justice and social change (Malik, 2012, 19).

The ASPIRE FLC has provided a place for faculty to engage in these processes of critical pedagogy. As faculty undergo the processes targeted at improving students' academic success and retention, it logically follows suit that faculty members' success and retention in academia would be affected as well. While ASPIRE was developed to target AA&PI student success and retention, it also resulted in the development of community and belonging for faculty members—especially non-tenure-track faculty who have struggled with feeling underappreciated and disconnected from their departments and larger academic settings. Indeed, of the twenty-one faculty participants in ASPIRE's FLCs, seventeen were lecturers.

The FLC was rooted in the principles of Ethnic Studies and the praxis of critical pedagogy, a synthesis of theory, action, and reflection. The findings from our participants indicate that a critical praxis is necessary for an effective Ethnic Studies FLC to follow this synthesis. FLC faculty engaged with theory by participating in workshops that helped inform them about the various needs, issues, and experiences of their students, and also provided them resources to better serve their students holistically. Action took place through the development and implementation of critical pedagogy that incorporated the theories they learned from the workshops. Faculty practiced critical reflection with their newly formed critical communities of praxis where they can support each other, which in turn allows them to better support their students.

A vital part of critical praxis is an increased awareness of inequity and a focus on addressing that. As a result, our participants brought up other challenges and recommendations for potential workshops and trainings, including topics that will address needs our participants have noticed among students. Topics include supporting Southeast Asian students, supporting undocumented students, supporting South Asian students, conflict mediation, and variance in achievement among Asian American groups and strategies to support underrepresented groups.

The ASPIRE FLC helped us understand and address the needs of both our AA&PI students and faculty. It allowed us to really support our AA&PI students during the difficult moment of distance learning in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing anti-Asian violence in the community. Learnings from the FLC still impact our participants' pedagogy and allow us to be more responsive to the needs of our students as well as each other as colleagues. Responsiveness is a key component of Ethnic Studies, and AB 1460 was meant to ensure that the CSU system is responsive to the needs of California's increasingly diverse communities. Ethnic Studies was born out of a collective response to the institution, and thus, Faculty Learning Communities that are rooted in Ethnic Studies are necessary for effective implementation of AB 1460.

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We would like to dedicate this article to Dr. Catriona Rueda Esquibel, Associate Dean of the College of Ethnic Studies, who passed away on February 8th, 2024. She was a brilliant, creative, and fierce *mujerista*, whose vision, leadership, and guidance uplifted our faculty, staff, and students. She was our friend, colleague, teacher, and accomplice, and we will continue her legacy through our commitment to defend and protect Ethnic Studies. ¡Catriona Rueda Esquibel Presente!

NOTES

1. Heart Check Questions created by Dr. Arlene Daus-Magbual (2015).

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