

THE GENESIS OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

To say the least, our goal of creating an Asian American Studies Program at the University of Texas at Austin was a forbidding task. One year ago, we needed only look to problems at schools like Princeton and Northwestern to fully digest our task at hand. At that time, our movements were simultaneously working toward the same end. And while we would miraculously achieve our goal almost one year to the date in which it was born, we crept slowly to ensure our movement's success. We duly observed the efforts of students across the country and hoped to avoid the pitfalls that they unfortunately encountered.

The University of Texas at Austin, a school funded under the auspices of a patriarchal Texas Legislature, did not seem to be an ideal institution for a relatively nascent academic program like Asian American Studies. Even though the University supports two well-known ethnic studies programs in African and Mexican American Studies, Asian Americans have not historically had much social or political clout in Texas or at the University.

Not surprisingly, the impressive strength of Mexican and African Americans is largely responsible for the creation of the University's respectable ethnic studies programs. These programs, which are entering their second decade of existence, were created during a time of tremendous social change. As the University of Texas recovered from the academic and social upheaval caused by the 1950's Heman Sweatt case, a challenge in which a black male successfully petitioned the Supreme Court for admittance to the University's School of Law, increased awareness of the two ethnic groups was unavoidable.

Almost thirty years after the creation of those ethnic studies programs, a group of undergraduate students at the University decided they were not satisfied with their

educational opportunities. I joined the diminutive cohort with the hopes of somehow initiating an Asian American Studies Program like those found at UC-Berkeley or Los Angeles. We gingerly began our improbable trek towards the creation of an academic program that was relatively unknown in the South. Although the University has an impressive Department of Asian Studies, we were convinced that we could persuade the University of Texas brass to invest in a separate program about Asian Americans that has proven meritorious in schools across the country.

As we considered our strategy, we soberly acknowledged that a prodigious series of protests and hunger strikes would not have the desired persuasive effect. As I saw it, our student body was not prepared or interested in a political spectacle that demanded attention on this issue. However, without the option of turning to protest, would our movement survive the many anticipated bureaucratic obstacles? I was convinced that it would.

At many schools, students have encountered substantial shoals from their university administrations. Summarily, their movements turn to protests, marches and occupations of administrative offices. However, this was not the path that the group and I wanted the movement to take. We methodically created a plan of action in which we would respectfully present the University administration with a cohesive proposal for the creation of Asian American Studies. Without much pomp or circumstance, the president reluctantly (but fairly) agreed to the formation of a committee to investigate such a program. Although it was not the quick solution that we initially wanted, we eagerly took what we could get. On January 30, 1996, seven months after its inception, the presidential ad hoc Committee on Asian American Studies unanimously urged the president to begin work on an Asian American Studies Program. At last, our patience and work paid its dividends.

As just a regular student, my colleagues and I were able to swim the murky bureaucratic waters of the University. Now, as student body president, I am dedicated to ensuring that the University of Texas at Austin fulfills its promise of creating an Asian

American Studies Program. With a keen eye on the prize, a simple group of University students were able to secure a wealth of academic opportunities for generations of students to come.

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