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Asian Studies & Higher Education

PART I:

- Where did Asian Studies come from?
- How did Asian Studies change over time?

The development of Asian Studies stems from the tensions that existed post World War II. After the war, Asian studies was born out of the political and social unrest that dominated the 1960s¹. The historian James D. Anderson said, “Racism was imbedded in the nation’s foundations, affecting its major institutions, including the institutions of higher education².” The students and faculty that fought the hardest to create new avenues of education sought to deconstruct the typically Eurocentric lens of education. The successful development of these programs came from the hands of persistent students and faculty who fought, protested, and disrupted the system in place. The origin of Asian studies stems from San Francisco State College before it quickly spread throughout California and across the nation. Despite the field’s early success, the challenges would persist and the University of Illinois took huge steps in the 1990s to push the field even further. The boundary-pushing development of Asian Studies owes much of its success to the ability of students to unite and fight in the face of fear for the common good.

Students and faculty at San Francisco State College and the University of Illinois made some of the most impactful accomplishments in the development of Asian Studies. It was at San Francisco State College that students leveraged their collective power to accomplish remarkable

¹ Wang, L. Ling-Chi. “Asian American Studies.” *American Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1981): 349.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2712470>.

² Sharon S. Lee, “The Historiography of Asian American College Students,” in *An Unseen Unheard Minority*, 9. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021.

feats in the development of Ethnic Studies. Students at the college created the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) to demand a more inclusive and more relevant education. The group formed in the spring of 1968 and was comprised of the following groups: the Black Student Union (BSU), the Latin American Student Organization (LASO), the Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC), the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), and the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE)³. Collectively this group of student groups would protest for 5 months for an Ethnic Studies program. As more time went on students and faculty alike felt extreme pressure to cave. Students faced trouble as nearly 700 had been arrested and faculty suffered from the incredible amount of students opting out of school⁴. On March 2, 1969, “the TWLF signed a settlement with the SFSC administration. The agreement established a School of Ethnic Studies, the first of its kind in the nation. The school contained departments of American Indian studies, Asian American studies, black studies, and La Raza studies (for Chicanos and Latinos).⁵” This marked a huge success as the program sought to shift the focus of education from the classic Eurocentric lens to a more inclusive lens. This and the preferential admissions for all students of color helped to garner support amongst all students⁶. This was a huge win for all Ethnic studies, but especially Asian studies. In the first semester after the strike, the School of Ethnic Studies offered 17 Asian American studies courses⁷. The Third World Liberation Front and its members were able to accomplish the incredible feat of changing the school’s policies and educational offerings through student protest. The continued growth of Asian Studies was time and time again a byproduct of student protest and the students of San Francisco State College set the precedent.

³ Daryl Joji Maeda, “Campus Activism,” in *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 29. New York: Routledge, 2011.

⁴ Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 43

⁵ Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 43

⁶ Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 43

⁷ Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 43

After the initial successes of the Third World Liberation Front, the push for Asian Studies spread across the west coast and into their schools. The University of California, Berkeley had begun their own proposals before the protesters of SFSC but to no avail. After the success of their San Francisco neighbors, they continued to oppose the administration through protest and obtained similar successes. Three months after the Berkeley strike began the college announced that they would create an ethnic studies department in the fall of 1969⁸. The success of student-led protests was the common denominator in the success of early Asian Studies programs.

By the 1990s, Asian students were accepted on campuses and more Asian Studies programs began to spring up across the country. While the growth of Asian Studies was significant, it wasn't as widespread as anyone would've liked. The University of Illinois had a large Asian student population but failed to provide the necessary resources. Counting Asian students for diversity but not counting them as minorities, allowed the school to provide inadequate resources while publicly framing themselves as heroic⁹. Asian students were reasonably upset with the school's double standards and pursued change through student protest. The students of the University of Illinois sought two main resources; an Asian Studies program and an Asian American cultural center¹⁰. By 1992, Asian Students had organized themselves in a unified way to request an Asian American cultural center. With hundreds of signatures, the students handed their petition over to Chancellor Weir¹¹. The initial proposal was shot down by the Chancellor and students quickly began devising a new plan. Former legal cases offered a precedent for Asian Students to pursue legal action against the school for violation of Title VI

⁸ Maeda, "Campus Activism," 47

⁹ Sharon S. Lee, "We Are Minorities," in *An Unseen Unheard Minority*, 80. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021.

¹⁰ Lee, "We Are Minorities," 81

¹¹ Lee, "We Are Minorities," 93

regulations¹². Throughout the 1990s Asian students at the University of Illinois persisted in their fight for more equal treatment and allocation of resources. This persistence would ultimately lead to the establishment of an Asian American Studies program and Asian American cultural center at the school.

Notably, Asian Studies programs have grown increasingly in number since their inception, and equally important is how they have changed. Looking back at the goals of Asian studies programs and contrasting them with the goals of today's programs offers insight into this change. Columbia University's well-documented consideration of Asian studies, speaks to the early wishes of Asian studies. William Theodore De Bary notes, "Nor are these people to be studied like problem children needing our help. They are to be studied, rather, as peoples who can teach us much about ourselves, whose past can give us a new perspective on our own, and whose way of looking at things can challenge us to a re-examination of our own¹³." While the aims of the early Asian studies programs sought to learn from others, the goal of uplifting Asian students is not explicitly stated. Today's Asian studies programs are more explicit in this regard. May yer Thao was interviewed about her experience with Asian studies courses and she stated that they "helped her understand her responsibilities to my Asian American and Hmong communities¹⁴." For Thao and other Asian students, the goal of these courses and programs is to uplift and understand Asian communities. The early forms of Asian studies had a sense of otherness that is less prominent in today's programs. Thao makes this clear in her other comments when she says, "It is about giving our communities a voice, raising our visibility, fighting for resources that should also be shared with us, making room for our history and

¹² Lee, "We Are Minorities," 98

¹³ De Bary, William Theodore. "Asian Studies for Undergraduates: The Oriental Studies Program at Columbia College." *The Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (1959): 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1977840>.

¹⁴ Agnes Constante, "After 50 years, Asian American studies programs can still be hard to find," *NBC*, July 3, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/after-50-years-asian-american-studies-programs-can-still-be-n1022331>

contributions to this country, and accepting us as Americans as well¹⁵." The goal of today's Asian Studies programs has changed, but in some ways, it's stayed the same. Students and faculty remain curious and exploratory in their pursuit of Asian studies, students continue to fight for the inclusion of these programs, and the field continues to clarify the objectives of its students.

¹⁵ Agnes Constante, "After 50 years, Asian American studies programs can still be hard to find," *NBC*, July 3, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/after-50-years-asian-american-studies-programs-can-still-be-n1022331>

PART II:

- How did Asian Studies develop and change at Bowdoin College?

While there were calls for Asian Studies courses as early as 1965, Bowdoin College did not introduce the area of study as a program until the 1987-1988 academic year¹⁶. Early proposals were followed with the introduction classes in different fields with direct ties to Asian Studies. The school's institutional self-studies revealed key insight into the curriculum proposals that would garner enough support to justify a program. The study unveils the schools thinking behind introducing the program, "Under consideration are Asian and British Studies Programs, building in part on courses already offered in our curriculum. Whether we can develop such programs will depend in part upon the College's ability to find incentives to induce departments and individual faculty members to offer courses for such programs and in part on some support from outside funding¹⁷." The evolution of the Asian Studies program was helped greatly by thoughtful work from administrators, eager students, generous donations, and pressure to create an Asian Studies program similar to those across the nation.

Bowdoin's reluctance to implement an Asian Studies program was due to a plethora of concerns. Before the 1987-1988 school year Asian Studies classes were offered but there was no option to obtain a minor, major, or interdisciplinary major. Instead, classes were taught in other departments with a focus on Asia. Departments like Government and Legal Studies, Anthropology, and others offered the occasional class focused on Asia but these classes weren't made available regularly nor were they focused enough to warrant a degree with a focus in Asian Studies. As noted by the minutes from the Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee's

¹⁶ Bowdoin College, "Report of the President, Bowdoin College 1985-1986" (1986). *Annual Report of the President*. 95. <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/presidents-reports/95>

¹⁷ Institutional self study outline, 1986 August, Box #2, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

(CEP) meeting on Jan 26, 1987, prior to the program's formal creation the school was concerned with potentially low enrollment, irregular scheduling of classes, and major requirements¹⁸. The potential for low enrollment was acknowledged as a potential issue but shrugged off by Asian Studies faculty as "... the problems of class size, etc. can only be addressed once the program is underway¹⁹." The Report of the President provides courses offered along with their enrollment and the 1987-1988 report shows that the school's concern with low enrollment in Asian Studies courses was not unfounded. Apart from the Asian Studies 101 course, five out of the other seven courses had fewer than seven students, and the exceptions had respectively 10 and 12 enrollees²⁰.

Bowdoin's faculty was clearly at the forefront of Asian Studies' birth as a program, despite the less than promising enrollment numbers. Proposed plans for the Asian Studies major required eleven classes and a focus on either East or South Asian²¹. Amongst the requirements were classes in relevant languages of the region as well as classes centered on religion, culture, and history²². While the initial enrollment numbers in Asian Studies classes were small, the program was beginning to make waves across campus. Flyers, brochures, pamphlets, and other informative materials circulated across campus and spoke to the interest on campus.

Another key issue that plagued the early development of Bowdoin's Asian Studies program was a lack of funding. Bowdoin's administration had their concerns regarding the program and was tentative to spend money on the project. Luckily, the Asian Studies program would benefit from generous donations from several sources. The first donation and ultimately

¹⁸ Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee meeting minutes, Jan 26, 1987, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Bowdoin College, "Report of the President, Bowdoin College 1985-1986" (1986). *Annual Report of the President*. 95. <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/presidents-reports/95>

²¹ Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee meeting minutes, Jan 26, 1987, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

²² Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (1987-1988)" (1988). *Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks*. 269. <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/course-catalogues/269>

the catalyst of the program was the \$490,000 grant given by the Pew Memorial Trust to help aid the program²³. Other donations came from groups such as Freeman Foundation, Luce Foundation, and the CBB Faculty Development Fund. These donations ranged from hundreds of thousands of dollars all the way up to millions²⁴. One of the major issues the program faced after its inception was finding a way to retain Professors as well as finding full-time Asian studies Professors. This is seen in Asian studies newsletters that are initially outlining the new faculty and faculty that left each year. These new donations helped the school hire more Professors and retain them. In 1980, the school only had two faculty members related to Asian Studies and this number remained low until the donations that came along with the legitimization of the program.

Early pamphlets from the Asian Studies program offer a more formal introduction to what the program is about. The pamphlet is marked by standard sections: The Curriculum, The Major and Minor Programs, Facilities & Resources, Faculty, and Careers. The careers section details the goal of the program citing what students do with their education in the program:

“A number of Asian Studies majors have gone on to graduate studies in various fields that allow them to pursue their interests in Asia. Others use the background gained in their Asian Studies education to further careers in business and professional occupations. For all, the universe of opportunities is broadened by an awareness of the importance of Asia to the United States and to the rest of the world²⁵.”

While the program marketed itself as any program, students and student groups offered more interesting advertisements for Asian studies and related groups. Several of these student flyers encourage students to take classes in Chinese and even imply that the language is easy to

²³ Report of the committee on Asian studies, Box #1, Department of Asian Studies Records, 1991, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

²⁴ Report of the committee on Asian studies, Box #1, Department of Asian Studies Records, 1991, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

²⁵ Blue “Asian Studies at Bowdoin” Pamphlet, Box #1, Department of Asian Studies Records, 1988-1991, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

learn²⁶. Despite the less formal nature of these student-made flyers, they also stressed the importance of Asian Studies, harping on the value an understanding would have in business as well as merely understanding the culture. When Asian Studies was first conceived the pamphlets from student organizations conveyed a laid back nature, while also detailing the benefits of the program.

Newsletters and engagement of previous Asian Studies Alumni helped fuel the growth of the program. The newsletters provide great insight into just how much the programs expanded. Each newsletter typically starts with a brief introduction describing the newest developments. These developments were often new hires, new donations, new course offerings, and more. After providing alumni with updates surrounding the newest updates of the program they shared updates of the programs' alumni. Year after year these newsletters grew in length and the number of alumni was staggering.

The growth of Asian Studies at Bowdoin was for a long time uncertain, yet the persistence of faculty and students was enough to continue to move the program forward. Shortly after the program's development, there were only a handful of majors. In 2009, the program boasted over 48 majors and minors in Asian studies with an even larger number taking language classes specific to Asia²⁷. This development is no accident and today the programs have grown even stronger and more focused. The program's website still makes note of the interdisciplinary nature of the program yet, the classes of today are far more focused. Bowdoin's Asian Studies program was once operating as a trial and today the program has passed the test of time and is one of the nation's top Asian Studies programs. However, there is forward-thinking to be done.

²⁶ Learn Chinese Language Flier, Box #1, Department of Asian Studies Records, 1988-1991, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

²⁷ Asian Studies Newsletter Summer 2009, Box #1, Department of Asian Studies Records 2000-2007, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special collections & Archives Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.

Students and faculty alike have sought for the program to offer courses pertaining to Korea and of course, the program could always benefit from being officially named a department. The Asian Studies students and faculty deserve credit for the tremendous success of the program in spite of all the obstacles facing them.

Citations

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