BRIDGING THE BIG TWELVE

The Committee on Institutional Cooperation Asian American Studies Consortium

josephine lee

I don’t have any additional budget for Asian American studies programming or curriculum development; there is a running joke among my colleagues that the Asian American studies program is just me and my Xerox machine.

Administration is quick to come to Asian American studies when there is a public relations problem, but we don’t hear from them with much else.

Diversity at my institution means African American and Latino, not Asian American.

We don’t have a formal Asian American studies program to speak of; our cultural center tries to do some academic programming and initiatives, but there are no faculty.

I am the only faculty member who is working on behalf of Asian American studies, and my line isn’t even dedicated to Asian American studies. So what I do is on top of my regular research, teaching, and service responsibilities to my home department.

On February 3, 2006, the University of Minnesota, in collaboration with the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), hosted a gathering of thirty-three representatives from Asian American studies departments, programs, and advising/student services units at the Big Ten
Center in Chicago. What was shared at that meeting, as these thoughts reveal, highlights how the challenges of working in Asian American studies continue to be institutional as well as intellectual. These discussions resulted not only in some necessary venting of frustrations, however, but in something much more positive. In examining our shared interests in program building, teaching, and research in Asian American studies, our group also embarked upon a more formal collaboration, the CIC Asian American Studies Consortium (CIC-AASC).

This article describes how interinstitutional collaboration, such as that encouraged through the CIC-AASC, might directly address some of the challenges of building Asian American studies programs today. These challenges are not unique to CIC universities or to schools located in the Midwest; rather, they are familiar to many who are trying to grow Asian American studies programs with limited resources. As such, the CIC-AASC might serve as a useful model for professional and institutional collaboration that can help further the field as a whole.

First founded in 1957 by the presidents of the Big Ten, the CIC now comprises twelve research universities at thirteen campuses: the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign and Chicago campuses), Indiana University, the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. CIC projects have been organized in multiple areas of research, administration, libraries, international study, and technology, and the CIC-AASC was directly inspired by earlier collaborations such as the CIC American Indian Studies Consortium.

A CIC collaboration in Asian American studies seems particularly timely, given the strong interest in Asian American studies overall. Undergraduate teaching in Asian American studies at many CIC institutions has grown steadily in the past decade. There are currently undergraduate minors, certificate programs, or other undergraduate degrees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Ohio State University, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison,
and new minors have been proposed at several other schools. Although no independent graduate degree programs have as yet been established at any of the CIC institutions, interest in Asian American studies among graduate students is high, and Asian American studies faculty have played a crucial role in training the next generation of scholars and teachers to work in a variety of fields. Faculty, staff, and students at many CIC-affiliated institutions have garnered awards, fellowships, and other honors, and the success of these individual Asian American studies departments, programs, and faculty has been instrumental in changing larger perceptions about Asian American studies as a "California-centric" field.

These successes, however, accompany concerns about how Asian American studies can continue to grow and thrive at these universities, particularly in a climate of financial cutbacks. Asian American studies in the CIC faces challenges similar to those at many institutions where Asian American studies is a relatively new endeavor. Many public universities have experienced a steady loss of funding for higher education that began well before the current fiscal crisis. Any growth of new fields has been greatly constrained by the grim realities of cutting and consolidating programs, raising tuition and fees, and downsizing faculty and staff. Not all CIC institutions have programs in Asian American studies, and many of the existing programs lack adequate funding and resources for expansion. The demands placed on educating undergraduates and developing undergraduate degree programs directs faculty time and energy away from faculty research programs and graduate student advising and training. At a significant number of these universities, faculty (the majority of them untenured) and graduate students in Asian American studies work in intellectual isolation. Furthermore, Asian American studies in the Midwest region has neither the demographic clout nor the institutional history that it carries on the West Coast.

Recognizing these challenges, the stated aims of the CIC-AASC are to provide an effective structure for collaboration in Asian American studies among CIC institutions; to encourage mentoring, recruitment, and retention of faculty and graduate students; and to acknowledge the distinctive research and teaching in Asian American studies now based at CIC institutions. Though the CIC-AASC's charge is specifically lim-
Ited to the twelve universities that comprise the CIC, its larger goals and accomplishments—fostering the expansion of the field, encouraging networks and exchanges, and furthering Asian American studies in the Midwest—will hopefully extend far beyond the "Big Twelve."

**History and Goals: The CIC-AASC**

Asian American studies faculty, staff, and graduate students from CIC institutions first met on November 12, 2000, at a daylong meeting, "Asian American Studies in the Big Ten," hosted by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. At this meeting, representatives from many of the Big Ten schools expressed the desire to see Asian American studies become a vital part of the research and curriculum at their home institutions. Six years later, representatives from Asian American studies from all twelve CIC-affiliated universities reconvened. At the 2006 meeting, it was evident that significant progress had been made in developing Asian American studies. Schools such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign now had significant numbers of faculty as well as a strong and regular curriculum. New programs at the University of Minnesota and Michigan State University had been established, and older programs such as that at the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin–Madison (founded in 1989 and 1991, respectively) had been revitalized by the hiring of new faculty. A number of universities had also hired additional staff for advising the increasing numbers of Asian American students throughout their campuses.

Participants were hopeful and excited by the major changes that had occurred in the field and at their own institutions. However, it also became quite apparent that there is not a uniform increase of resources for Asian American studies across CIC institutions. At a number of universities, there were still only single courses or irregular offerings in Asian American studies, and faculty and staff who worked in Asian American studies were hard-pressed to satisfy the many demands placed on them. Ignorance about Asian American studies was rampant; often Asian American studies was conflated with Asian studies, and Asian American faculty and students were misidentified as "international."
These challenges, of course, are not unique to the CIC. Asian American studies scholars in fledgling programs at many universities and colleges face similar challenges. Institutions of higher learning have become increasingly aware of the need for a culturally diverse faculty, staff, and student body, but also less able to sustain the additional resources that such diversity necessarily demands. Within CIC-affiliated universities, mentorship and leadership have often been in short supply. Because Asian American studies is so new to most of the CIC institutions, the bulk of work has fallen on the shoulders of faculty and staff who are at relatively early stages of their careers. There is considerable pressure on faculty early in their careers to work with growing numbers of students, teach new courses that address highly charged issues of racial and ethnic difference, and serve on many committees. Faculty at the 2006 meeting described the stress of carrying service loads much heavier than their colleagues in other fields, explaining research agendas to colleagues who were unfamiliar and sometimes hostile to racial and ethnic studies, and meeting the demands of students frustrated by the lack of Asian American representation on campus. Concerns about faculty advancement—whether meeting the standards for tenure or stalling out at the associate level—were palpable. Particular challenges face those who work in Asian American studies in those parts of the Midwest where location exacerbates intellectual isolation. Faculty expressed dissatisfaction with their physical distance from library archives, communities of color, and other scholars in their field as well as with the pressure to “teach diversity” not only to their students but to colleagues and administrators. Neither undergraduate nor graduate student teaching in Asian American studies is always adequately staffed, even at CIC institutions with Asian American studies programs in place. Lack of monetary and human resources makes it difficult to envision new staffing, when increasing numbers of students, administrative reorganization, and cutbacks in staffing contribute to stress, burnout, and turnover. This in turn makes for an unstable infrastructure that is less capable of supporting Asian American studies and Asian American students.

The discussions at the 2006 meeting illustrated how the stereotype of the model minority masks the reality of working in Asian American studies. Achievement and success are not guaranteed by hard work, profes-
sional duty, and personal sacrifice. Asian American studies has increased in visibility as universities realize the value of multiculturalism and the need to understand global interaction and migration. However, the commitment of resources, both monetary and human, has not always kept pace with the pressures generated by this visibility.

All this was acknowledged at the 2006 meeting, yet it was also apparent that these challenges did not dampen anyone's enthusiasm for building an intercampus collaboration. By midmorning, participants already had voiced their interest in some kind of effort that would build on our collective strengths. Plans for the consortium were developed the following year. In 2007–2008, Judy Wu (associate professor of history at Ohio State University), Kent Ono (director of Asian American studies and professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), and I drafted versions of the proposal with the input of colleagues throughout the CIC. Barbara McFadden Allen (CIC director), Katie Player (then CIC associate director of academic programs), and Steven Rosenstone (dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota and the chair of the CIC Liberal Arts and Sciences Deans), provided valuable feedback and encouragement throughout the process.

The proposal for the CIC-AASC went through many different incarnations before it was finally approved by the Liberal Arts and Sciences Deans in spring 2008. However, several goals remained consistent: first, that the consortium should encourage cooperation and collaboration in developing Asian American studies research, teaching, and programming; second, that it should provide opportunities for mentoring and networking; and third, that it should emphasize new and distinctive Asian American migrant and immigrant communities, histories, and cultures, particularly in the Midwest.

The overall organizational philosophy reflected concerns expressed by many working in Asian American studies at CIC schools. We thought that any formal programming needed to be user-friendly. Asian American studies faculty and staff, already overburdened with the service obligations and bureaucratic demands of their universities, did not need another set of committees and more paperwork. Our emphasis was on using flexible and pragmatic structures of collaboration to address common needs and
concerns in researching, teaching, or administrating Asian American

studies.

The need for mentorship and fellowship was especially clear, given the
geographic isolation and the relatively newness of Asian American stud-
ies at many CIC universities. The CIC-AASC could encourage forms of
collaboration that would benefit both those members at more established
programs and those at schools without formal units in Asian American
studies. The CIC-AASC could actively encourage faculty and graduate
student recruitment and retention efforts, and the CIC-AASC could thus
act as a way of “bending the pipeline,” so that new graduate students and
faculty in Asian American studies who previously sought training and jobs
largely on the West Coast could now flow out of and into the Midwest.

Finally, the consortium’s midwestern locations could more broadly
encourage new directions for the field of Asian American studies. At the
February 2006 meeting, participants noted how much the field of Asian
American studies had changed from its early beginnings in California.
Asian American studies at CIC institutions should do more than replicate
well-established programs on the West Coast; rather, they should focus on
their distinctive strengths, building a new understanding of midwestern
locations as central to the examination of Asian American community,
identity, and affiliation.

**Collaborative Programming**

The programming of the CIC-AASC is proposed and determined by in-
dividual faculty, staff, and students at CIC schools, who meet yearly at the
Big Ten Center to share program profiles, compare notes, and brainstorm
ideas. Yolanda Zepeda, associate director of academic and international
programs at the CIC, and I help to organize these efforts. What I describe
here is a representative sample of what has already been carried out under
the aegis of the CIC-AASC.

**Technological Collaborations**

The CIC-AASC has set up electronic mailing lists for faculty, staff, and
graduate students as well as a password-protected site for sharing docu-
ments and information about our respective programs. We have also begun
developing a series of “webinars” on various topics in Asian American studies using Adobe Connect. The CIC-AASC also participates in CourseShare, a CIC effort to promote intercampus sharing of low-enrollment, specialized courses across the arts and science curriculum, through synchronous technologies (such as videoconferencing and desktop collaboration tools, readily available on most CIC campuses). Through the CIC-AASC, Asian American studies became one of the targeted areas for the CourseShare program, sharing a series of graduate seminars and specialized courses related to Asian American studies that have included the following:

- Fall semester 2007: “Asian American Cultural Criticism,” Josephine Lee, University of Minnesota (with Ohio State University)
- Spring quarter 2008: “Readings in Asian American History,” Judy Wu, Ohio State University (with Penn State)
- Fall semester 2008: “Mixed Race Asian Americans,” Kent Ono, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (with the University of Wisconsin–Madison)
- Spring semester 2009: “Race and Performance,” Josephine Lee, University of Minnesota (with Penn State and Ohio State University)

**Research, Teaching, and Networking Opportunities.**

The CIC-AASC has also organized a series of faculty manuscript workshops, matching faculty with books-in-progress and readers in similar areas of expertise for an extended and detailed discussion of a book-length project. These provide an opportunity for friendly advice and valuable suggestions for revision and publication.

In addition to providing cosponsorship for public conferences (such as the conferences “Philippine Palimpsests: Filipino Studies in the 21st Century” and “Southeast Asians in the Diaspora” held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2008, and “Global-Is-Asian: Asian Diaspora Identities in the Context of Globalization” at Michigan State University in 2009), the CIC-AASC has supported a number of smaller workshops and seminars held at one of the CIC campuses. Among these was the Asian American Studies Leadership Institute held in September 2008 at the University of Minnesota and hosted by the university’s Asian American Studies Program. This gathering of twenty participants from eight different universities stressed leadership and career development for faculty and staff in Asian American studies, and became a space to
share strategies not only for growing and sustaining Asian American studies programs but also for supporting and reenergizing individual leaders. Participants reflected upon their professional and personal goals, exchanged ideas for best practices, and asked frank and challenging questions about negotiating with administration, work-life balance, racism in the workplace, and institutional support for Asian American studies. A different though equally lively and productive conversation was had at the Penn State research workshop on October 10–12, 2008, cosponsored by the CIC-AASC and the Penn State Asian American Studies Program, where CIC-AASC faculty had the opportunity to share research projects on topics ranging from Asian American rhetorics to contemporary performance art to transnational adoption.

Other projects are still ongoing. Among them is one initiated by a digital storytelling workshop held at Ohio State University in May 2009. Twelve participants from seven different CIC schools came together to create short digital narratives for Asian American studies research, teaching, and outreach. These and other digital stories will be used in teaching, academic presentations, outreach efforts, and grant applications.

CONCLUSION

The CIC-AASC is still a very young endeavor, and it is hard to predict what its ultimate accomplishments will be. As an interinstitutional and to some extent largely voluntary endeavor, it might be seen as outside the central functions of any one university. However, even these first two years have already produced some valuable experiences, a sense of mutual support, and the desire for lasting connections. Thus, the CIC-AASC, in sharing resources and leadership among the CIC campuses, can provide an important example of collaboration for Asian American studies more broadly. The rewards are many and the costs relatively modest; even more important, working collectively yields outcomes that cannot be achieved by a single campus or individual.

Note

1. The Big Ten is the oldest U.S. Division I college athletics conference, first formed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Indiana Uni-
versity, the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan, Michigan State
University, the University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Ohio
State University, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin. Since
Penn State joined in 1990, there have been eleven universities in the Big Ten.
The University of Chicago, one of the cofounders of the Big Ten, no longer
participates in the Big Ten conference. Member schools of the Big Ten and
the University of Chicago are also affiliated through the Committee on In-
stitutional Cooperation.