

# COLLECTIVE PAST AS A COMMUNITY-BUILDING INITIATIVE

*Teaching Asian American Studies Through the History  
of Student Activism*

*Sunmin Kim and Daniel Lin*

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**Abstract.** In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased visibility for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #StopAsianHate movements, colleges and universities around the country experienced a renewed call for the institutionalization of Asian American studies. Despite this surge in energy for an already decades-long movement, many program-building initiatives have taken years to materialize and eventually fallen to the wayside. To address the mismatch between student demand and institutional impasse, we organized a course that focused on the history of Asian American studies activism at Dartmouth over the decades. In the course, students conducted archival research on the past iterations of the movement and communicated the results to the wider campus community, showing that Asian American students had always carved out a space for themselves within the historically white institution. In the process, the collective past served as a community-building initiative that brought together students, faculty, staff, and alums and reaffirmed the present call for Asian American studies.

## INTRODUCTION

How can students and faculty design and implement an Asian American studies course when there is not much institutional support? College campuses in recent years have witnessed a resurgence of student activism oriented toward racial justice, and the institutionalization of Asian American studies has been one of the key demands of Asian and Asian American students.<sup>1</sup> The student demand is especially strong in private institutions on the East Coast where the impact of the 1970s ethnic studies movement has been less visible.<sup>2</sup> Even when administrators heeded to student demands, programs and departments usually took years to materialize in these institutions, and the students in the meantime were left with a limited number of courses focusing on Asian American-related issues.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Asian American studies has become an academic equivalent of a unicorn in these institutions: students call for it, but no one has seen its institutional manifestation.

This paper denotes an attempt to tackle this impasse through teaching. In the winter term of 2023, we offered a special research-intensive course that focused on the history of Asian American student activism on our campus. Entitled “Race, Politics, and Power: The History of Asian American Activism at Dartmouth College,” the course intended to serve as a community-building initiative around Asian American identity by offering students an opportunity to connect with other activists from the past. We also wanted to document and tell the story of past activism to the broader college community, confirm the existence of the vibrant Asian American community, and build a broad support base for the eventual institutionalization of Asian American studies. In this paper, we situate the course in the broader history of the Asian American movement and document the course’s origins, methods, and outcomes, as well as its limitations. In doing so, we hope to present a template of pedagogy and activism that provides some inspiration to others in a similar situation.

## PEDAGOGY AND ACTIVISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

“Overrepresentation and disenfranchisement.” In the early 2000s, L. Ling-Chi Wang used this phrase to succinctly summarize the state of Asian American students in the U.S. higher education.<sup>4</sup> Wang documented the rapid increase of Asian American students in the nation’s elite colleges, many of whom were children of post-1965 immigrants. He also noted that their perspectives and life



experiences were not sufficiently represented in the curriculum and workings of these institutions. Asian Americans, Wang lamented, were merely present in these schools without much power to determine their own trajectory within them. When then-second-year student Daniel Lin and sociology professor Sun-min Kim met to read and discuss Asian American history in Summer 2021, they thought along similar lines as Wang. Lin was beginning to be involved with the student-led movement for Asian American studies at Dartmouth. Kim's hiring as an assistant professor a few years earlier occurred within the context of the student movement. While both Lin and Kim appreciated increased and increasing numerical representation of Asian Americans in the college, they were also keenly aware that numbers did not immediately translate into power, and both lamented the lack of recognition and support at the institutional level.

As Lin and Kim set out to read the history of the Asian American movement, they saw a common pattern: "overrepresentation and disenfranchisement" was not limited to the early 2000s or 2020s; the Asian American students of the 1960s, who coined the very term "Asian American," also faced a similar conundrum, albeit in a vastly different political context. William Wei provides a detailed account of how the students at the University of California, Berkeley, engaged in consciousness-raising efforts through Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), mainly under the influence of radical Black activism and anti-war movements.<sup>5</sup> Further, books such as *Mountain Movers: Student Activism & the Emergence of Asian American Studies* made Lin and Kim appreciate how the student activists tackled disenfranchisement, by articulating a new political subjectivity and telling the stories of their communities.<sup>6</sup> Particularly interesting to Lin and Kim was the fact that the famed strike by Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at the San Francisco State College in 1968, rightfully hailed as the origin moment for Asian American studies, put forward similar demands as the student movements in the twenty-first century. That is, both the students in the 1960s and 2020s demanded substantial representation in membership and curricula of their respective colleges, and they were seeking an institutional space dedicated to those demands, namely ethnic studies departments. Yen Le Espiritu, in her classic work on the Asian American movement, has traced the dynamic between pan-ethnic identity-building and its institutional manifestations.<sup>7</sup> Lin and Kim saw that they were participating in essentially the same process documented by Espiritu—an attempt to force the imprint of their identity in the institutions that heretofore ignored and rejected it.

Lin and Kim were inspired by this revelation. The obvious missing link between 1960s San Francisco and 2020s Hanover, New Hampshire, was the time and people in-between: there must have been those who, Lin and Kim thought, were inspired by the movement and engaged in similar mobilizations at

Dartmouth. Lin set out to uncover the history by way of an independent study supervised by Kim in fall 2022. To make a long story short, Lin found a treasure trove of materials housed in the college's archive, which documented the rich history of Asian American student activism and social life. Lin also reached out to numerous alums who directly participated in the historical events documented in the archive. When Lin shared these findings with Kim, they both agreed that more people should be aware of this history. They came up with an idea of teaching a course relying on the material Lin discovered.

## DARTMOUTH CONTEXT

Our course was embedded within a particular institutional context of Dartmouth, which was no exception to the general trend we noted in the beginning of this article. Students at Dartmouth had for years demonstrated a high demand for an Asian American-focused academic program, but they had faced a stalemate around the Asian American studies program-building initiative, and, relatedly, a lack of Asian American-focused courses. Over the years, a few dedicated faculty members had taught courses on Asian American experiences, and a revolving cast of postdocs and contingent faculty had intermittently taught specialized courses.<sup>8</sup> Still, students yearned for more and remained frustrated with administrative barriers to the institutionalization of Asian American studies.

The yearning, of course, waxed and waned along with the cycle of student movements. The four-year college lifecycle for student activists means that each generation faces the problem of intergenerational turnover—that is, new students often start from scratch in their advocacy, without being knowledgeable of the efforts before them. The first discussions of advocating for Asian American studies at Dartmouth came in 1991, when students created the Asian Pacific American Issues Forum (APAmIF).<sup>9</sup> But it was not until 1998 that the first Asian American studies courses were offered, and the first official advocacy came in a proposal submitted by the Asian American Task Force under the Pan-Asian Council in 1999.<sup>10</sup> The activism of this era culminated in a 2004 petition which garnered over one thousand signatures.<sup>11</sup> Out of this petition came an official announcement from the College that promised to implement Asian American studies.<sup>12</sup> Two tenure-track faculty were subsequently hired, but when they submitted a program proposal, they were ultimately denied. Those faculty left shortly thereafter in 2008.<sup>13</sup>

A following wave of activism rose up once again in 2014, when advocacy for Asian American studies appeared in the Freedom Budget, “a list of demands by student activists aimed at making Dartmouth equitable for marginalized

students.”<sup>14</sup> This document was the rallying point for the occupation of the President’s office in Dartmouth’s administrative building, Parkhurst Hall, during the same year.<sup>15</sup> Following the occupation, Asian American Students for Action (4A), which had engaged in coalitional solidarities with the organizers of the Freedom Budget as well as various BLM protests on campus, submitted a proposal for an Asian American studies minor and major. Simultaneously, the organization also helped organize the Fight for Faculty of Color, which protested the disproportionate lack of retention of faculty of color at Dartmouth.<sup>16</sup> This activism in the mid-2010s ignited on the heels of the BLM protests in 2013–14 after the high-profile killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Rekia Boyd, among other instances of police violence toward unarmed Black people. In 2021, on the heels of the #StopAsianHate movement and the Atlanta Spa Shootings, Dartmouth Professor Eng Beng Lim submitted another petition for Asian American studies, which garnered nearly one thousand signatures.<sup>17</sup> And finally, at the end of that year, yet another generation of student activists at Dartmouth put forward the agenda, garnering national attention in the following year with a front-page article in *The New York Times*.<sup>18</sup> This was the Dartmouth Asian American Studies Collective (DAASC), who remains active today.

Lin participated in the tail end of this long history. Before his independent study in fall 2022, however, Lin and other student activists were unsure of where they stood in terms of their advocacy for Asian American studies. They knew they were not the first to advocate for this issue, but without knowledge of the specific institutional history regarding Asian American studies, they often wondered what kinds of setbacks past generations of student activists faced and how they navigated them. As we would learn through our course, much of what they thought as new activism had already been tried at Dartmouth by their predecessors—yet there was no one to tell them about that fact. Although the momentum during the pandemic gave renewed attention to the decades-long initiative to build an institutional base for Asian American studies, it was clear that nothing would materialize in short time.

Facing this gridlock, in the winter term of 2023,<sup>19</sup> Lin and Kim set out to teach a course that would function as both a critical ethnic studies class and a community-building initiative. By centering the course around the history of Asian American student activism at the college itself, we aimed to provide students interested in Asian American studies and activism with information about the historical context in which they were embedded. In a sense, we were building on the tradition of the ethnic studies movement in the 1970s and its radical pedagogy: we wanted to learn and tell the story of the Asian American community at Dartmouth, rendering the story—and ourselves—as worthy of academic attention.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the course would provide round-the-clock

activities focusing on Asian American identity to engage the broader campus community, incorporating not only students and faculty but also supportive administrators and sympathetic alums. We wanted the course to function as a stepping-stone for building a more robust Asian American studies community, whether institutionalized or not.

## WHAT WE DID

### *Preparations*

In prepping for this course, we worked on three fronts: course material, students, and administrative support. As we were working with students with close to no research experience, it was crucial that we prepared our archival material to be easily accessible. This meant that we needed to identify and catalogue historical records pertaining to Asian American studies activism ahead of time. Lin did much of this work throughout 2022. Before he assumed the formal role as the teaching assistant of the course, Lin conducted an independent research project as he was participating in the student movement. Over twenty weeks, Lin sifted through six boxes of archived documents<sup>21</sup> and browsed community websites created by past student activists. He subsequently interviewed nineteen students, faculty, alums and former community members who had participated in the movement. At the end of his project, Lin compiled his research into 1) a comprehensive timeline of events; 2) a database of contact information for potential interviewees; 3) notes from previously conducted interviews; and 4) “starter docs” which identified archival boxes and questions to serve as a launchpad for future student research. Because of this preexisting knowledge, Lin could answer students’ questions and help fill in gaps as students conducted their research. Basically, our students were provided with not just boxes of documents but also a trove of Google Drive resources that contained metadata on those documents. They were able to catch up with Lin’s effort by reading through the prepared resources. This allowed a relatively smooth entry into historical research for students with no prior training.

As discussed above, students at Dartmouth had demonstrated a considerable demand for Asian American studies courses and activism. Many students from the Dartmouth Asian American Studies Collective (DAASC) ended up enrolling in our course. The heavy overlap between coursework and activism created a unique dynamic in which in-class interactions spilled over into activism beyond the classroom. Additionally, in the years leading up to this course, we noticed a considerable uptick in Asian American political consciousness among

students, likely due to extraordinary events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests,<sup>22</sup> and the #StopAsianHate movement.<sup>23</sup> As a result, we received more than twenty requests for our course, even though new courses at Dartmouth typically struggle with enrollment.<sup>24</sup> We decided to cap the enrollment at sixteen because we felt that it was the right size for us to effectively supervise. To limit enrollment, Kim informed prospective students that the immersive nature of this course would demand a considerably higher amount of time and energy compared to other courses. Many opted out, likely leaving the most dedicated students.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 1. Students after the offline exhibit. Photograph courtesy of Deborah Jung.

The resulting sixteen students were diverse, both in terms of their exposure to Asian American studies and their social backgrounds. Some had prior experience participating in Asian American activism and were taking concurrent courses related to Asian American studies. These students participated in activism in high school, through BLM and other protests. They specifically mentioned Asian American studies as something they sought out at Dartmouth. At the same time, others knew close to nothing of Asian American history beyond general knowledge of their family's immigration trajectory, if any at all. Many were children of immigrants from East Asia; there were a few with origins in Southeast and South Asia. A few hailed from Asia but were educated

in international schools that offered either U.S.- or UK-based curricula. All but two were first- or second-year students.<sup>26</sup>

Supportive administrators enabled us to scale up the course. As a junior faculty member at an institution that prizes research, Kim had been repeatedly advised to prioritize his own publications above teaching and mentoring. This proposed course would require him to put more energy into working with students, thereby driving him away from the tenure expectations. However, Kim's senior mentors supported his participation in this endeavor, likely because they were sympathetic to the students' concerns. When Kim shared the idea of the course, they advised him to use the existing course and revise its content rather than submitting a new course proposal, the review process for which would take close to a full year. Thanks to this critical advice, Kim was able to teach the course a couple of months after Lin and Kim came up with the idea.

The senior colleagues also encouraged Kim to seek funding from the administration. Upon request, a sympathetic dean stepped in with a rather generous support package.<sup>27</sup> A speaker series, a class trip to the Association of Asian American Studies conference in Long Beach, California, and online and offline exhibits were made possible through the funding. In short, this initiative certainly benefitted much from Dartmouth's resource-rich environment, as well as supportive administrators who were willing to go out of their way to approve the course and provide ad-hoc funding support on very short notice. Still, we contend that the tenet of this course—archival research into the history of activism—stands without such administrative and financial resources, and this model can work within an institutional environment with less support.

### *The Course*

We spent the first two weeks of the term giving a crash course on Asian American history with lectures, readings, and videos. We discussed notable events such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese American incarceration, as well as important concepts such as the model minority myth and racial triangulation.<sup>28</sup> The students also learned about the Asian American movement beginning in the 1960s, to which they responded enthusiastically. Their weekly reflection memos discussed how Asian American history was, in a way, their own personal and familiar history. Students analyzed how past events still reverberated in their lives at college, and some students confessed that they had never learned the history before. Others mentioned the fact that the course was the first time ever in their life that they were in a majority-Asian environment and how the setting transformed their learning experience.<sup>29</sup> They wrote in their reflection memos about feeling a sense of community with other students.

After this initial introduction, we organized the sixteen students into four teams, each focused on a different topic: art and literature; social life; hate crimes and sexual assault; and Asian American studies activism. To facilitate this organization of teams, Lin sent the class a timeline summary of his research with embedded links to primary documents before the first day of class. We hoped to pique students' interest by exposing them to the archival documents early on so that they could begin identifying which topics attracted them. After giving students one week to review these materials concurrently with the "crash course" in Asian American history, we held an in-class group discussion. In this collective reflection, students identified themes in the archive and learned about how each of their peers related to this history. We then synthesized these discussions into four general categories, which became the basis of the teams. To streamline communications and workflows between each team and the instructors, each group appointed a student to be the "Team Lead," who would report to Lin and Kim on a weekly basis.

At the beginning of the third week, the students visited Dartmouth's special collections and archives library, where library staff walked them through library workflows, research methods, and best practices on working with archived materials.<sup>30</sup> Later in the term, library staff introduced the Omeka-S digital platform which students used to create their digital exhibit.<sup>31</sup> This set the foundation for students' research for the rest of the term.

In the following weeks, as teams of students explored the archive, we arranged for two guest speakers to visit the class. The first speaker was a former staff member, Nora Yasumura, who played a pivotal role in the history of AA student life at Dartmouth through her decade-long tenure in early the 2000s. In fact, Yasumura compiled the archive of Asian American student activism and preserved it within the College's special library, which became the starting point for Lin's research. In her talk, she recalled her experiences of working with Asian American students and explained the administrative politics surrounding Asian American studies in her time. We found that the opportunity for students to interact with a person who figured so significantly in the archive resonated strongly with them and inspired them to dive even deeper into their research.

The second speaker was scholar-artist Dr. Julian Saporiti, the creative behind the No-No Boy Project.<sup>32</sup> Dr. Saporiti received critical acclaim by writing and singing folk songs about empire, migration, and Asian and Asian American history, even submitting an album as a part of his PhD dissertation. In a Zoom lecture that was open to the public, Dr. Saporiti shared with students how he conducts his research, with a focus on oral histories and interviewing, and how he translates his academic research into artistic expressions. The students were deeply inspired by his strong emphasis on engaged and place-based scholarship.

Halfway into the term, students began reaching out to alums and former faculty and staff members. Aided by Lin's database of key individuals, a presentation on best practices for interviews, and Dr. Saporiti's discussion on oral histories, students conducted a total of twenty-nine interviews. These conversations supplemented the documents in the archive by filling in gaps in the history. While meeting people who had, until then, only appeared as names in the archive, the students were able to humanize the history, and consequently, begin to realize their own embeddedness within it. In other words, the elusive history of Asian American student activism at Dartmouth became a more concrete community-building initiative as past and present student activists connected with each other.

As the final assignment, students put together a digital exhibit to document and communicate their findings to the public. While they had done good research, it was clear that the whole breadth of their findings was too large to function as the final product. The process of curating a digital exhibit allowed students to critically pinpoint the key theses of their groups' findings. With advice and support from library staff, we led students through three stages to produce the digital exhibit: a preliminary report, a final report, and an editorial period. The students produced a rough draft two-thirds of the way through the ten-week term. Lin and Kim provided some feedback, and the students responded through more research. At the end of the term, they turned in the final report which summed up their work.

Our goal, however, was to share the research with the college community and beyond, and we found that the final reports were not suited for this purpose. As expected, they were just like typical term papers—there were traces of serious effort, but the reports felt rushed and untidy in presentation. This made the course effectively continue past the 10-weeks and throughout the spring break, well into the beginning of the spring term. We formed a small editorial committee of students from the course who volunteered to edit the digital exhibits for readability and consistency in style.

### *After the Course*

Aside from the digital exhibit, students had the opportunity to present, discuss, and reflect on their work in other academic and community-building settings. These included a presentation at the 2023 Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) virtual conference<sup>33</sup> followed by attendance at the in-person conference in Long Beach, California. An array of publicity events followed as well.<sup>34</sup> In the end, for the period of a few months, we offered the student round-the-clock activities in addition to academic content. These activi-





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## Asian American Student Activism at Dartmouth College

Introduction by Lance Paul Sunga '26, Lin Lin '26, and Anh-ton Nguyen '26



Front Row: Kai Zhou '24 (sitting on the left), Rachel Kahng '25, Lin Lin '26, Deborah Jung '24, Lauren Lim '26, Helen Deng '26, and Lance Sunga '26 (sitting on the right). Second Row: Daniel Lin '23 (TA), Divik Verma '26, and Anh-ton Nguyen '26. Third Row: Emma Nguyen '25, Tanya Wongari '25, and Constance Laprand '25. Fourth Row: Nolan Yee '25, Robert Bonwell '25, Jessica Yang '25, and Jeon Yu '25.

"Remember that consciousness is power. Consciousness is education and knowledge. Consciousness is becoming aware. It is the perfect vehicle for students. Consciousness-raising is pertinent for power, and be sure that power will not be abusively used, but used for building trust and goodwill domestically and internationally. Tomorrow's world is yours to build."

Yuri Kochiyama

### About This Project

Through this course, we have realized that we can accumulate the power to build Dartmouth's place in "tomorrow's world." The course that culminated in these exhibits trained us in the methods and interpretation of the archival history of our people. We conducted research in Rauner Special Collections Library, explored sources from other collections, and conducted interviews with alumni/stakeholders involved in past activism at Dartmouth College.

We read secondary scholarship like Clare Jean Kim's "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans" and learned from our teaching assistant, Daniel Lin '23's culminating research in Asian American Studies efforts. After we completed working through archival material, we used our research to contextualize how Asian American students mobilized to change the culture of the College in the past.

Asian American Studies activism appeared again around ten years later in 2014, when an independent Asian American Studies department was included by student organizers in the "Freedom Budget," along with departmental status for Dartmouth's existing ethnic studies programs. The Freedom Budget was a list of demands by student activists aimed at making Dartmouth equitable for marginalized students, and it generated controversy when the activists occupied Parkhurst Hall to protest the lack of administrative response. In 2015, Asian American activist group 4A (Asian American Students for Action), presented a plan for an Asian American Studies minor to the Asian and Middle Eastern Studies department in 2015, and then a proposal for a major and minor in early 2016. In 2016, a group of "concerned alumni" also sent an anonymous letter to Dartmouth administration, criticizing the College's lack of Asian American Studies in light of a claimed support for diversity and the existence of Asian American Studies programs at other comparable institutions.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Atlanta shooting, a group of faculty led by WGSS Professor Eng-Beng Lim released a petition in 2021 outlining a plan to bolster Asian American Studies on campus. The Dartmouth Asian American Studies Collective, a newly-formed student activist group, published their own petition in the fall of that year advocating for an Asian American Studies program. Both petitions received over one thousand signatures, and DAASC's activism was covered by both the *Dartmouth* and the *New York Times*. In response, Dean of Interdisciplinary Programs Matthew Delmont is currently forming a steering committee to investigate future steps that Dartmouth can take towards implementing Asian American Studies.

"It is now more vital than ever that Dartmouth fulfills its commitment to anti-racist pedagogies and equity for all students."

DAASC, "A Call for Asian American Studies at Dartmouth," 2021

Asian American Studies advocacy at Dartmouth stretches at least twenty-five years into the past, yet no academic program exists to this day. The nature of this work is cyclical, with promising surges in advocacy that ultimately result in little change.



#### Pan Asian Council Proposal

A 1999 proposal written by the Pan Asian Council on how to improve Asian American student life, including implementation of Asian American Studies



#### Asian Studies and Asian American Studies Initiatives at Dartmouth

A 2001 proposal for Asian American Studies and Korean Studies, written by Professor Dave Kang and other influential faculty



#### Asian American Studies at Dartmouth College, an Open Letter

A 2004 open letter written by the Pan Asian Council to the Dean of Faculty, advocating for Asian American Studies.



#### Campus Letter of Support

A 2004 petition by the Pan Asian Council for Asian American Studies, signed by over 1,100 students and alumni

Figures 2 and 3. Sample pages from the online exhibit. Courtesy of the Dartmouth Libraries.

ties provided a glimpse of a different kind of student life in an institution where athletics, Greek organizations, and professional societies effectively functioned as a “hidden curriculum.” Kim had for years observed at Dartmouth that there was much more to the lives of students than classes: how they socialized, partied, and generally spent time had a greater impact on students than what they were studying in classrooms. Through these extracurricular activities, students developed the sense of who they were, made friends, and contemplated career options after college. Of course, in the historically white institution, these opportunities for Asian American students were considerably limited. Our course, for a short period of time, reached out to this dimension of student life by providing a community and a set of alternative activities, presenting a glimpse of a different college life.

In the end, the course received widespread publicity, having engaged multiple communication channels in many students’ concurrent extracurricular activism for Asian American studies. The students’ work was featured in Dartmouth’s faculty-wide newsletter and its bimonthly alumni magazine, pushing the message of the need for Asian American studies to tens of thousands of people in the college community. While we have yet to see much tangible progress in terms of the institutionalization of Asian American studies, this was a positive step toward that goal.



Figure 4. Candlelight vigil for the victims of the Monterey shooting, organized by the DAASC. Photograph courtesy of Deborah Jung.

## OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

### *What We Think We Did Right*

Overall, the course was a success. Not only were students able to learn about the history of their college, but they were also able to build a community amongst themselves by understanding how the history placed them in a similar bind as Asian Americans in a historically white institution. Students learned that what seemed like an institutional void was not actually a void. There were others like them who came before. Administrative barriers and the transitory nature of student activism had erased previous iterations of activism from the institutional memory, thus obscuring the lineage from prior activists to students today. However, understanding the history of the institution's past allowed for student activists to better navigate the bureaucracy of the present. Students could process institutional redirections with greater confidence and gain ideas for reviving initiatives which had happened in the past. In a way, the goal of a class like this is to show students that Asian American studies has existed at Dartmouth, just not in an institutionalized form. By building community with their predecessors who were doing the same exact work twenty years prior, students reinvigorated the activism that was already happening.

### *What Could Be Improved*

Many of the course's struggles came from our attempt to balance a research project and an academic course. We wanted to maintain the students' enthusiasm in the course while conducting high quality research and creating a solid product which could effectively communicate this history to a broader audience. However, although we created a strong community, we found that we lagged on several project deadlines, an issue we attributed to stratified acclimation to a college environment. By nature of having many new students in the course (six first-years, eight second-years, and two third-years), we found that students were not as used to the fast-paced environment of the quarter system at Dartmouth. Although the first-years came into the course with a lot of energy and excitement around the project, given that this course was in their second quarter of college, it was more difficult and stressful for them compared to their more experienced peers.

Additionally, we may have benefitted from greater preparation before the course. It was nearly an impossible task for students to learn about the convoluted history of Asian American studies activism *and* convey what they learned to the college community within ten weeks. As a result, although they

did advance the existing research on a few fronts, the students spent a lot of time getting acquainted with what was available in the archive and studying the results of Lin's independent study project. If we were to teach this course again, we might allot more time *before* the course in the form of videos or guides for students to read up about the history so they could immediately begin working on new topics. A prerequisite course may also function well, but given the few sparsely offered courses at Dartmouth, this was not realistic for our situation. Alternatively, the course might run better in a semester-system where there is more time for ideas to marinate and for students to work longer on a project.

### ***Student Feedback***

To ensure that we properly reflected upon the course, we organized two focus group sessions approximately six months after the course activities wrapped up to hear what the students had to say. While the students affirmed some of what we had gathered from our own reflections, they also offered a fresh perspective on the course's outcome.

The most surprising finding to us was the emotional toll the course took on the students.

The issues with deadlines, which we largely attributed to inexperience, according to the students, had mostly stemmed from emotional hardships they were going through. They were only able to realize this fact well after the completion of the course. Their concerns were multifold, but two things stood out to us as potentially important for a project like ours.

First, the students experienced a lot of stress just by witnessing the Asian American history at Dartmouth. That is, the story was, expectedly, not a rosy tale, ridden with invisibility and failures of representation. In some cases, the students could sense downright hostility from the college towards their presence. This was emotionally burdensome material especially for the new students to bear because they, for the most part, had maintained a very positive perception of the much-storied institution. The students reported frustration and sadness in learning the fact that the famed traditions of Dartmouth, which they admired deeply, did not include people like themselves, and these feelings often left them numb and unable to tackle the fast-paced work schedules they were subjected to. Additionally, this emotional burden was not equally spread across the students, as each of the four groups had different research topics of focus. Students whose primary topic was campus hate crimes and sexual assault against Asian students faced a considerably higher emotional toll, as compared to the students primarily working on art and literature or social life. As a result,

where we initially saw differences in adaptation to college life, we were really witnessing trauma reactions.

The second point of stress came from the pressure of being put under a spotlight. To motivate the students to satisfy deadlines, we emphasized the importance of this project, noting its potential impact for both Asian American studies in the short term and Asian American students as a whole in the long run. According to the students, Lin and Kim made it sound like “everything depended on this project.” This was a clearly unfair burden for students to withstand, and we erred on the side of exaggerating our potential impact. Instead of energizing the students to take up more work, we pressured them to the point of diminishing return.

Responding to these various concerns, the students made a few suggestions that could have made the whole experience better. We were able to deduce three concrete ideas from the discussion.

First, we recognized the importance of checking in and regrouping at a mid-point of the course. The students opined that, due to the busy schedule and amount of the work, they felt rushed throughout the term and did not have a moment to reflect. Had they had a chance to catch their breath and regroup somewhere in the midpoint of the term, they argued, the final stretches of the course could have worked much better for everyone. It remains to be seen whether it would be plausible to have a spare session given the tightness of the quarter system, but this idea certainly needs to be considered seriously in any future iterations of courses like ours.

Second, the students felt that even though they were trained in archival research, they were not trained in how to analyze and present to the public the outcome of their research. As a result, students felt lost facing the vast number of documents they unearthed: that is, they felt that they had so many important stories to tell, but they were not sure how to tell those stories effectively. We find this point very important. Initially we were focused on training students to access the archives, and analysis and presentation remained an afterthought. Hence, we did not implement any training session after the initial practicum on archives. The next iteration of this course can pay equal attention to analysis and presentation as to archival work itself.

Third, maybe a two-term sequencing of the course may work better in the future. Many of the mistakes documented above—rushed schedule, lack of training, and emotional hardships—can be addressed through proper phasing. Students expressed that instead of moving sequentially from archival research to synthesis to presentation, they felt that they were engaging in all phases at once. If we were to dedicate two terms, and therefore two units for this course,

we could probably build in all the above into our schedule. The ideal design would be for students to work in the archives in the first term and return for analysis and presentation in the second. If there was a robust Asian American studies program at Dartmouth, this two-term sequence model could easily serve as a culminating experience. The students who would like to work on research that is not a senior honors thesis could opt into this program, and they could experience archival research while collectively building something important for the community.

As much as students provided constructive feedback for this course, they also expressed significant gratitude for it and highlighted the course's impact on their activism, personal lives, and academic as well as career trajectories. For many, the class provided an ample opportunity to learn and practice research skills with a topic that "feels close to home." Their proximity to the subject matter and resulting insights seeped into their extra-curricular activism, allowing students to conceptualize their organizing as "continuing a lineage" of Asian students who fought for the same things in decades prior. Thus, not only were students able to humanize and relate to this history, recognizing it as being a "network of interpersonal relationships," they situated themselves within that history and committed to carrying it forward. For some students, the course inspired personal research projects around Asian American identity and political participation, while some even changed their majors and altered their envisioned career trajectories altogether. Above all, students overwhelmingly affirmed the community-building aspect of the class. Students agreed that they would go out of their way to greet each other in passing, even a year after the course's conclusion. Students felt bonded with each other, having gone through a uniquely emotionally challenging, yet empowering, experience together.

## AFTERWORD

Today, the reverberations of this class continue to inform students' understandings of how they are situated in the institution as they persist in their advocacy. Those first-and-second-year students who were in the class are leading the present movement for Asian American studies in 2025. However, much of their recent advocacy has not been as explicitly focused on institutionalizing Asian American studies as it has been toward intra-campus solidarities and creating space for Asian students. This change in focus takes cues from previous student movements that experimented with other ways of creating Asian American spaces and community in lieu of formal institutionalization. Most recently, student organizers' efforts have been focused on Palestine, signing

on to statements by the Dartmouth Palestine Solidarity Coalition and heavily participating in protests and encampments on campus. On May 1, 2024, when President Sian Beilock moved to arrest ninety peaceful protestors on the campus Green, seven of the arrested students were members of DAASC.<sup>35</sup> Leading up to and in the aftermath of the protest, students readily mapped the connections between Asian American studies advocacy and Palestinian solidarity, charting the parallel struggles of Asian Americans and Palestinians alike, against U.S. imperialism and colonialism.<sup>36</sup>

In many ways, the fight for Asian American studies, both at Dartmouth and across the country, can be boiled down to the tension between formal inclusion and substantial empowerment. Asian American students are nominally included in the university and represented on their promotional materials, but the extent to which their issues are recognized and prioritized is a different matter. On May 20, 2024, a Chinese international graduate student at Dartmouth was reported missing and eventually found dead. She had checked herself into the campus medical center for a “mental health crisis” the week before.<sup>37</sup> Less than two months later, on July 7, a Korean American undergraduate student was found dead, having drowned in the Connecticut River.<sup>38</sup> His death was ultimately ruled an accident after a party hosted by his fraternity and another sorority.<sup>39</sup> In regular fashion, Dartmouth sent out general resources for mental health counselors and designated a few hours for students to grieve. However, they did not offer much acknowledgement of systemic cultural change toward avoiding deaths like these in the future. While doing so, the Dartmouth administration did not connect the dots of two Asian students passing in such quick succession. Asian students were left wondering why.

Months after their deaths, Lin and one of the students from the class who had graduated that year published an opinion piece in the college newspaper, reflecting on this institutional and sociocultural neglect.<sup>40</sup> In the aftermath of this article, Lin received an outpouring of messages from the Asian community on campus, echoing the sentiments of Asian invisibility. The strong responses affirmed that despite Asian students’ continued advocacy for themselves, such as what was seen in our course and the resulting exhibit, the institution paid no attention to their presence. Dozens of people thanked Lin for putting into words what they had only thought. Independently from this piece, in January 2025, an undergraduate student, who arrived at Dartmouth *after* our course, published an article riffing on the same themes of institutional neglect and the resulting harm.<sup>41</sup> The piece addressed historically high rates of sexual violence toward Asian women on campus and their futile efforts to force institutional awareness. Much of their source material came from the very digital exhibit that the class produced.



From these articles and their receptions, we were able to witness how our course not only served as a space for Asian students to exist and learn together, but the fact it also spurred reflection within the broader Asian community on campus. Although as of 2025, Dartmouth has yet to see an institutionalization of Asian American studies, we find ourselves pushing forward with the same question as our predecessors: How can Asian people in America move beyond formal inclusion toward empowerment and self-determination? We may not see concrete evidence of progress, but we cherish the connections we built and continue to build among community members.

In retrospect, our course tackled three challenges at the same time. First, at the most basic level, there was a mismatch between the vibrant community of faculty and students interested in Asian American studies on one hand, and the lack of an institutional home on the other. Facing the slow process of institutional change and the difficulties of student activism, we showed through our course how this vibrant community has continually created space for themselves despite the lack of an institutional home. Thus, we did not so much lay foundation toward eventual institutionalization as much as we uncovered what has been there all



Figure 5. The Pan Asian Community (PAC) Resource Room. Photograph courtesy of Deborah Jung.



along. Second, as a critical ethnic studies course being taught to mostly new students, our course inevitably functioned as the racial coming-of-age process for many of our students. Students were in the process of discovering their racial identity and its social significance, and the history of Asian American activism at the college provided them with a lens through which to ask the question of what it means to be Asian American in a historically white institution. Lastly, we addressed the common challenge of navigating the college environment for new students. Away from home and independent from parental control for the first time, students were eager to find new communities on college campuses. Our course was a refreshing opportunity to find community for many students embedded in a campus culture that prioritizes Greek organizations, sports teams, and professional societies.

In short, our effort was an attempt to bypass institutional impasse through the power of community. We relied much on the relationships which existed within the institution—not only those of current members but also of those who passed through the institution in the past. While we did not obtain the sustainable institutional homebase for Asian American studies at Dartmouth right away, our effort signals that the community will always be there and the demand for institutionalization will persist. Making visible this dimension will be a key asset for Asian American studies activism going forward.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

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3. Francie Diep, "What Asian American Student Activists Want," April 6, 2021, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-asian-american-student-activists-want>.
4. L. Ling-chi Wang, "Overrepresentation and Disenfranchisement: Asian Americans in Higher Education," *Amerasia Journal* 33, no. 1 (2007): 76–100, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.33.1.un185t7156865803>.
5. William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Temple University Press, 1993), 21. See Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), 300–10, for the relationship between these campus-based movements and the broader efforts to organize Asian American communities.
6. Russel Jeung, Karen Umemoto, Harvey Dong, Eric Mar, Lisa Hirai Tsuchitani, and Arnold Pan, eds. *Mountain Movers: Student Activism & the Emergence of Asian American Studies* (UCLA Asian American Student Center Press, 2019).
7. Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Temple University Press, 1992).
8. As we would understand through our work, this was not a coincidence. After the tenure denial of an Asian American faculty member in 2016, the administration launched a series of postdoctoral fellowships to bring in Asian American studies scholars, largely to address the demands from politically active students. However, without an institutional homebase of an Asian American studies department within Dartmouth, nearly all of these young scholars left the college, oftentimes joining other institutions as tenure-track faculty members. In recent years, course offerings have become more diversified as Dartmouth invested in hiring a number of faculty members whose research focus on Asian American studies, while as of fall 2025 there still is no institutional base for the initiative.

9. Sociology 76 Class, "Asian and Pacific American Issues Forum," Winter 2023, *Dartmouth Libraries*, <https://course-exhibits.library.dartmouth.edu/s/SOCY76/page/asian-and-pacific-american-issues-forum>.
10. Sociology 76 Class, "Asian American Studies Activism," Winter 2023, *Dartmouth Libraries*, <https://course-exhibits.library.dartmouth.edu/s/SOCY76/page/aas-activism>.
11. Sociology 76 Class, "Asian American Studies Activism."
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13. Catherine Morris, "Bahng's Tenure Controversy Remains Cloud Over Ivy League for Asian American Studies Advocates," July 17, 2016, *Diverse: Issues In Higher Education*, <https://www.diverseeducation.com/students/article/15098834/bahngs-tenure-controversy-remains-cloud-over-ivy-league-for-asian-american-studies-advocates>; Dartmouth Asian Pacific American Alumni Association, "Asian American Studies at Dartmouth: Timeline," <https://dapaaa.dartmouth.org/s/1353/clubs-classes15/index.aspx?sid=1353&gid=288&pgid=24985>. "Princeton and Columbia each agreed to establish a program only after highly publicized student protests and letter campaigns," L. Lin-Chi Wang writes in his 2007 review, "but to date, no substantive and cohesive program has emerged at either institution." The situation remains similar at Dartmouth in 2025. L. Lin-chi Wang, "Overrepresentation and Disenfranchisement."
14. Sociology 76 Class, "Asian American Studies Activism."
15. The Freedom Budget Coalition, "What is the Freedom Budget?," September 5, 2021, *Dartmouth Radical*, <https://www.dartmouthradical.org/freedom-budget>.
16. Sociology 76 Class, "Asian American Studies Activism."
17. Sociology 76 Class, "Asian American Studies Activism."
18. Anna P. Kambhampaty, "The Fight for Asian American Studies," January 22, 2022, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/style/asian-american-studies-dartmouth.html>.
19. Dartmouth employs the quarter system and the winter term lasts ten weeks from the first week of January to early March.
20. Jeung, Umemoto, Dong, Mar, Tsuchitani, and Pan, eds., *Mountain Movers: Student Activism & the Emergence of Asian American Studies*; Ida Yalzadeh, Ryan Doan-Nguyen, Chloe Shawah, and Maryam Tourk, "Keyword as Frameworks for Liberatory Pedagogy and Praxis: Meeting SWANA and Asian American Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 26, no. 2 (2023): 175–84; Jocyl Sacramento, Edward R. Curammeng, Ray San Diego, and Allyson Tintango-Cubales, "Toward A Radical Asian American Studies Pedagogy," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 26, no 2 (2023): 207–19.
21. Nora Yasumura, a former staff member at the Office of Pluralism and Leadership (OPAL) had personally collected these materials and entrusted them to the Rauner Library.
22. Nitasha Sharma, "The Racial Studies Project: Asian American Studies and the Black Lives Matter Campus," in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies* (Fordham University Press, 2017).

23. Jungmi Jun, Joon Kyoung Kim, and Bongki Woo, "Fight the Virus and Fight the Bias: Asian Americans' Engagement in Activism to Combat Anti-Asian COVID-19 Racism," *Race and Justice* 14, no. 2 (2024): 233–50.
24. Many social science and humanities courses are capped at twenty students. Research oriented courses like ours usually have fifteen or less students.
25. Initially there were a couple of non-Asian students interested in the course, both of whom were white. With more information, they voluntarily opted out before the start of the term. We made no conscious efforts to control the racial makeup of the course.
26. Another thing to consider is the effect of COVID-related shutdowns on students' experience of the college. Our third-year students ('23s) started their college careers during the heyday of the pandemic and, as one student told us, they "felt like they were not different from freshmen."
27. We are grateful for the funding support from Matthew Delmont, the Frank J. Guarini Associate Dean of International Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies.
28. The students were introduced to work such as: Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Erika Lee, *Making of Asian America: A History* (Simon & Schuster, 2015); Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2013); Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27 no. 1 (1999): 105–38; William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Temple University Press, 1993); and Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," in *Asian America: A Primary Source Reader*, eds. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, K. Scott Wong, and Jason Oliver Chang (Yale University Press, 2017).
29. Everyone in the course was of Asian descent. We do not have exact data, but such composition of class is extremely rare, if not impossible, at Dartmouth.
30. We thank Peter Carini at Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth, for his time and support throughout our archival research project.
31. We thank Laura Braunstein and August Guskowski for helping us with Omeka-S.
32. <https://www.nonoboyproject.com>
33. We are grateful to Teresa Swartz for granting us the opportunity.
34. The then-president Philip Hanlon visited our offline exhibit in person and asked the students why Dartmouth did not have Asian American studies program, despite the vibrant history of the community presented in our material. The students were somewhat confused by the question, but in retrospect this episode represents perfectly the administrative response to our efforts—that is, not straightforward refusal but delay and diversion, which stem more from neglect than outright hostility. Of course, Asian American history as well as the recent tragedies at Dartmouth teaches us that the former is not too different from the latter in practical consequences.
35. Dartmouth Asian American Studies Collective, "DAASC's Statement for the May 1st Arrest," May 2, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C6fe7e6g2ED/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C6fe7e6g2ED/?img_index=1).

36. Dartmouth Asian American Studies Collective, "We Will Not Accept Statements Without Action. DAASC's Response to Dean Scott Brown's March 1st Statement on the Hunger Strikers' Demands," March 8, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C4Rc-gdg-Af/?img\\_index=3](https://www.instagram.com/p/C4Rc-gdg-Af/?img_index=3).
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38. The Dartmouth Senior Staff, "Won Jang '26 Dies at Age 20; Authorities Investigating Potential Hazing," July 7, 2024, *The Dartmouth*, <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2024/07/won-jang-26-dies-at-age-20>.
39. The Dartmouth Senior Staff, "Won Jang's Death Ruled Accidental by Police," September 18, 2024, *The Dartmouth*, <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2024/09/won-jangs-death-ruled-accidental-by-police>.
40. Daniel Lin and Deborah Jung, "An Open Letter to Asian Students at Dartmouth," October 10, 2024, *The Dartmouth*, <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2024/10/lin-an-open-letter-to-asian-students-at-dartmouth>.
41. Sam Kang, "An Open Letter to Asian Women at Dartmouth," January 10, 2025, *Spare Rib*, <https://www.spareribdartmouth.com/post/an-open-letter-to-asian-women-at-dartmouth>.