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LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

AT AN ASIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER

BACKGROUND

Cultural Centers in American higher education serves as a safe haven for many students from racial minority groups. These spaces primarily serve the needs of their respective student populations. Specifically, at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, Asian American Cultural Center provides a sense of belongingness for both Asian international and Asian American students on campus. One of its initiatives includes an internship program that aims to provide students self-awareness and understanding of Asian American identity development which includes personal, ethnic, & cultural identity along with professional development. This internship program contributes to the overall students' development.

INTRODUCTION

University of Illinois Urbana Champaign's Asian American Cultural Center (AACC) opened its doors in Fall 2005 as a result of the need to create such space and serve Asian American students on campus. Prior to the opening of the cultural center, there has been a designated professional staff member housed in the Dean of Student Office who's main responsibility is to work with Asian American students, its organizations, and programs related to the community. This position was a half-time position created in 1997. Fortunately, funding was allocated a year before the position was created and gradually increased over time. I would argue however, that despite the allocation of such funding and creation of half-time position, Asian Americans still

considered as historically under-served community at this university. Eventually it was not until 2004, administrators passed a resolution to create a functional cultural center for Asian American students. This was heavily backed by Latino and Black students who have established a space they call their own – La Casa Cultural Latina and Black House.

FRAMING RACE IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this presentation, I define race as a social construct created by the society in which refers to one's ancestry often times referred to one's geographic origin. In the case of Asian Americans (& Pacific Islander), it was created as a political category in US context which includes not just East Asian population but also Southeast Asians (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Hmong, etc) and South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis). Most students we work with do not necessarily consider their race first but rather their ethnic & cultural identity (Filipino, Chinese-American, Korean, etc.).

As student affairs professionals, we have to be cognizant of student's experiences prior to moving to college depending on how much they are aware of their own racial and ethnic identity

In the United States, while it's a country of melting pot, Non-Caucasian students (people of color) are still seen as minority and underserved in many of its campuses hence the need to create cultural centers in the many higher education institutions. Omi and Winant takes it a step further in how they define race. They state that race as a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interest by referring to different types of human bodies (Ching & Agbayani 2012). In many ways, race plays a huge part in how students are treated by their peers and administrators. Students of color are often subjected to negative perceptions, stereotypes, often underserved and neglected their needs.

Racial backgrounds of students are collected during admissions application process. In many cases, campus demographics is considered for 'diversity' purposes. According to Spring 2014

University of Illinois (UI) Division of Management Information provides a racial background of the institution. The demographics are as follows: 52% Caucasian 15% Asian American 8% Hispanics, 5.3% African Americans. Additionally, an exponential growth of international students has been admitted in the last decade thus changing the landscape of the university. Spring 2014 data reports over 4,700 international students or 15% of the undergraduate campus attends UI. Majority of the international students come from China, India, and Korea. Chinese students alone comprised of over 2,500 (53%) undergraduates on campus. In 2008, AACC was asked to include in its mission to support its Asian international student population. With the rise of Asian international students, the internship program at the AACC has continued to evolve and increase awareness of Asian international students on campus.

INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

AACC Internship program started roughly 10 years ago. It has continued to evolve through feedback from previous interns to provide meaningful experiences for its students. It has hired to as few as three students in the beginning and up to 12 interns more recently. Student interns are selected based on experiences, skills, teamwork, and potential to work in a fast paced working environment through an interview process. Each student is assigned 12 hours a week and receives hourly rate compensation. Learning objectives for the internship program were revamped in fall 2012. Indicated in the beginning of the internship program, all student interns by the end of the year must have the following skills:

1. Learn the history of AACC, AAPI student affairs & studies
2. Introduction to scholarly works related to AAPI community
3. Self-awareness & understanding of Asian American identity
3. Encourage career development, aspirations, and goals,
4. Professionalism, teamwork, presentation skills
5. Enhance personal/ethnic/cultural identity
6. Professionalism in the work place
7. Career development, aspirations, and plans

8. Understanding student affairs, profession, and its mission
9. Connection to Asian American community
10. Connection to University of Illinois community

DATA AND SAMPLE

Over the last two years, evaluations were collected at the end of the academic year. The evaluation measured how the internship program fared according to the learning objectives.

These learning objectives were to be achieved through a series of readings, discussions, assignments, reflections, projects, and presentation. The evaluation states “*based on your own experiences while you have been an AACC intern...*” please rate the following. The evaluation used a 1-10 scale (with 10 being highest).

Learning Objectives	Avg 2013	Avg 2014
1. History of the AACC AAPI student affairs/studies	8.0	8.1
2. Understand the role of student affairs as a profession and its mission	7.7	7.6
3. Self-awareness & understanding of AA identity development	8.0	8.2
4. Professionalism, team work, presentation skills and ability to make sound decisions	8.4	9.2
5. Enhanced personal/ethnic cultural identity	8.3	8.8
6. Professionalism in the work place	7.9	9.0
7. Career Development, aspirations, and goals	7.9	8.4
8. Understanding student affairs profession and missions	8.3	8.0
9. Connection to the Asian American community	7.9	8.2
10. Connection to the University of Illinois campus	7.9	7.6
	n=8	n=6

In its first year of the evaluation, three topics emerged - Professionalism, teamwork, presentation skills; Enhance personal/ethnic/cultural identity; and Understanding student affairs profession

and missions”. These results suggest how the internship program assists in the students overall personal and professional development.

On another note, this year’s evaluation fared better than the year before. This is due to the fact that AACC learned its limitations and made it a goal to enhance the internship program. As a result the top three rated learning objectives are: professionalism, teamwork, presentation skills; professionalism in the work place; and enhance personal/ethnic/cultural identity. Professionalism was the one key area that the AACC worked on this year after learning from previous interns that they wanted to be in an environment where professionalism was prioritized. Some of these aspects consisted in how we execute programs for the students, how we communicate in person and in e-mail with colleagues and their peers, along setting up short term and long term goals that complements their career goals.

In highlighting some of the comments that interns have shared, one student intern described the experience, “I was happy to work with other Asian American students just like me. It was a great experience to learn about other cultures as well.” This student happily described a sense of belongingness in a predominantly white institution through making connections to the overall Asian American community. The same student intern went on to state that “this internship has enabled me to learn about the possibilities of exploring my identity and culture on campus. Before the internship, I was intimidated to get involved. I now feel more connected and that I belong”.

While student interns gain a sense of their own cultural and ethnic connection, they are also introduced to cross-cultural understanding through assignments and projects. All interns are required to complete two cross-cultural explorations in a semester from the following criterion:

(1) Attend another cultural center event sponsored by other cultural and resource centers, (2)

Attend an event led by Asian American Studies, (3) Attend an event hosted by the Illinois Leadership Center and/or (4) Interview a Student Affairs Professional. Most students benefited from this exercise as it allowed them to get to be in tuned beyond Asian American related activities on campus. One intern expressed, “I liked these assignments because (it) allowed us interns to reach outside of the center. It shows that we aren’t confined to this building and are encouraged to interact with the rest of campus”. Many of the interns choose to interview a student affairs professional which gives them access to other resources on campus.

Another student commented on the cross-cultural explorations, “It’s amazing how many cross-cultural explorations are available on our campus alone. I really appreciate going to these events and activities because they allowed us to understand different cultural groups. Another student described the cross-cultural experiences, “it was great learning to leave my comfort zone culture”. This intern enjoyed the challenge to attend such event where she wouldn’t have thought otherwise.

While many of the students enjoyed the benefits of attending other cross-cultural related programs, there were still a few that struggled to execute the assignment. Despite the overwhelming positive response to the cross cultural explorations, a few students found it difficult to relate other center’s events to Asian American issues. In the future, with the right framing and explanation that includes why these assignments matter and interconnected to providing a global education, students should be able to execute these cross-cultural explorations seamlessly.

Another assignment required for the student internship experience was to research and present a topic related to the Asian and/or Asian American community in the context of higher education and student affairs. Many of the student interns picked topics related to their own cultural and

ethnic interests. Topics in the past includes, multiracial students' experiences in colleges, how Bollywood portrays skin tones of women in the media, effects on Asian American model minority myth, mental health in the Asian community, and race relations with and without the practice of affirmative action etc. One comment we received was "I enjoyed researching about a topic that affected me personally and showing the rest of the interns and professional staff something I care about." This intern felt empowered to do her own research and present a topic that was very close as it relates to her own ethnic identity.

One more student went on to say that this project "helped me incorporate research into suggestions for future development. It helped me view research as means to become proactive on campus. This is a student leader in a South Asian sorority whose goal is to show awareness on South Asian issues. She has taken her own topic and applied it with her student organization as basis for educational presentations in the community.

While these comments suggest contributions to exploring oneself identity, it also assisted other students to practice their presentation and public speaking skills. "I thought it was a great way to demonstrate our skills and practice in front of an audience whom we were comfortable with." Each presentation was evaluated by the staff to give constructive feedback on content and presentation delivery. Most of these projects were presented during staff meetings towards the end of the year with a few exceptions of other seasoned interns who were chosen to present in front of a public audience as part of our weekly lunch program that yields over 80 people in attendance.

Another student described professional development as needed and the internship at the AACC has taught her to act in a professional environment. Results highlighted earlier suggest that

professionalism at the work place was a key contributing factors in providing meaningful experiences for the interns.

In various one-on-one situations, professional staff members encourage interns to reflect and are prepared to discuss the skills they gained from this internship. One of the students described one of the highlights about this internship was the flexibility to adjusting her responsibilities to tailor her skills and interests which in turn allowed the program to help develop her career. Through career advisement and guidance to pursue a career in advertising, this intern is now working in the marketing sector and received a scholarship award as Most Promising Minority Student by American Advertising Federation before she graduated.

CONCLUSION:

This Asian American Cultural Center provided a sense of challenge and support as part of its student internship program. Though very few were selected to serve as AACC interns, it has provided support that continues to enhance student learning, personal and professional development. Through a series of assignments, projects, and reflections the internship program provided a sense of cultural and ethnic understanding of who they are. In addition, we understand that many of the interns have different career aspirations and may not be interested in pursuing a career in social sciences or working in higher education. Despite different career aspirations, interns are still better prepared to discuss their experiences and gained skills transferable to their career aspirations. As a result, some students work for corporate firms, pursuing graduate school, and even FBI.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This study offers implications for what students learn from internship programs at the cultural centers. While most students gain a sense of identity and preparedness for career aspirations, one must think how other students who do not participate in the internship learn more about their cultural and ethnic identity. In the future, student affairs professionals must provide meaningful intentional experiences for all students particularly students who are served by the existence of cultural centers. In the case of American universities, cultural centers should continue to provide opportunities for involvement and development for its students. With the exponential growth of internationalization of higher education, the interns should gain more knowledge on Asian international students. This could be done by incorporating learning outcomes that is inclusive of international students experiences, articles related to international students particularly research related to students from China, India, and Korea. As the internship continue to evolve, one must think of other learning objectives that are currently not included which will continue to change depending on demographics and mission of the center. Overall, AACC has provided what they know and how they know information that is helpful as they navigate their cultural and ethnic identity, however it is up to the interns how they utilize and transfer these skills for their future endeavors.

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