

## **After 20 Years... Nine Priority Issues for Asian and Asian American Students at UMass Boston**

More than 20 years have passed since Asian and Asian American students first took action to improve the quality and relevance of our academic and social experience at UMass Boston. In 1986, students established the Asian Center to serve as an umbrella coordinating body and support structure for recognized Asian student organizations on campus and to provide a voice for Asian and Asian American students regarding relevant campus issues. In Spring 1987, the course, Sociol 323 Asian Minorities in America (now listed as AsAmSt/AmSt/Sociol 223L Asians in the US), was re-established in the curriculum. Asian American Studies courses have been taught every semester at UMass Boston for the past two decades since then, and UMass Boston is now recognized nationally as offering the most Asian American Studies courses of any university in New England. As undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled at UMass Boston, we have benefited from the curriculum, support services, and access provided by our urban public university. We have also faced discouragement, inequity, and neglect. We write this document in order to bring attention to both aspects of our university experience -- what is helping and also what is hurting.

Asian and Asian American students comprise roughly 15% of UMass Boston's "diverse" student body. US Census projections estimate that Asian Americans will continue to be the fastest growing racial/ethnic population in Massachusetts through 2025. High percentages of Asian American students attend high schools and community colleges in metro Boston that serve as pipelines to UMass Boston, both for first-year and transfer student populations. Many of us also transfer from private colleges and universities after 1-2 years due to financial constraints facing ourselves and our families. We comprise important segments of the international visa-holding student population as well. Beyond our numbers, we are linguistically and culturally diverse with important differences in our families' migration stories, our political and religious affiliations, our socio-economic profiles, our prior experiences with schools and communities, and our goals as students at UMass Boston.

Because of our own diversity and also due to the challenge of building campus life at a commuter school, a core group of students who knew each other from taking Asian American Studies courses began meeting regularly in Fall 2006 to address what we felt was a lack of voice, recognition, and unity for Asian and Asian American students at UMass Boston. On behalf of Asian American Studies Outreach (AASO), we convened several meetings together with members of the Asian Center to discuss and share our issues, concerns, and visions. This document grows out of our discussions of issues ranging from access and affordability to the curriculum and faculty/staff diversity to the overall campus environment.

### **Admissions, Advising, and Student Support**

In trying to compile data about Asian and Asian American students at UMass Boston, we realized that basic information is not available. For example: how many Vietnamese American students are currently enrolled; how many Cambodian American students have graduated in the past five years; how many Asian and Asian American immigrant students major in the College of Management in order to avoid taking the formal Writing Proficiency Exam. Not knowing this information prevents us from accurately analyzing the status of Asian and Asian American students and the subgroups that define our populations. Although the university publicly highlights the diversity of the student body, we are not aware of any university documents or plans, outside of research conducted by the Asian American Studies Program, that have specifically examined the profiles or stories of Asian and Asian American students within

UMass Boston from admission to graduation. Instead, we have to rely heavily on the individual Asian American staff and faculty whom we trust and who understand our backgrounds. Without these specific individuals, for example, in DSP, Admissions, the Advising Center, and Student Support Services, we would face many more obstacles at UMass Boston. This leads us to wonder, then, what happens if any of these individuals leaves? We need:

- an effective system for collecting and reporting disaggregated AA student enrollment data;
- an analysis of institutional barriers that hinder Asian and Asian American student success academically and socially;
- more multilingual, culturally responsive Asian American staff in admissions as well as in student support services, student life, other areas of enrollment services, and throughout the campus;

### **Racial and Cultural Campus Climate**

While some of us can speak with appreciation of receiving support and affirmation, Asian and Asian American students can also describe instances of being stereotyped, harassed, ignored, and falsely blamed not only by students, but also by staff and faculty. We cannot contribute to our full potential unless we experience an academic and social environment that affirms our identities and treats us fairly. We need:

- an improved campus climate with more opportunities for interaction, respect, and leadership;
- a fuller range and better quality of Asian food services on campus, with more opportunities for collaboration with community vendors;

### **Curriculum and Faculty Support**

Despite having more Asian American Studies courses and faculty than other universities in the region, we do not have a major. We are frustrated when AsAmSt courses only count as electives and when courses are canceled at the beginning of the semester. We are also frustrated in other courses when connections could be made to Asian American content, but instructors don't know how or don't have time.

Furthermore, since many of us come from immigrant families, we often look for more direct connections from our classroom learning to our communities and also to our homelands. We want:

- a major in Asian American Studies and more courses to fulfill general education requirements;
- more faculty with Asian American Studies expertise or background in departments across the university;
- more opportunities and financial assistance to support Asian community internships and service-learning;
- more opportunities on campus to study Asian languages and cultures (including Vietnamese, Khmer, and Korean) and more opportunities with financial assistance for study/travel in Asia;

We offer these nine issues as points of discussion to share with our fellow students as well as with concerned and responsible administrators, faculty, and staff -- especially with campus recognition of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month taking place in May.

Signed initially by (with other signatures of agreement on subsequent pages),

Son-ca Lam  
Environmental Science

Janet Vo  
History & Asian American Studies

Richard Truong,  
Management

Rathanak Pres  
Criminal Justice

Kathleen Inandan  
Psychology and Honors Program

Soramy Le  
Art