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Author

Liu, Marcia M.

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# Where We're Really From: NYC Asian American Students Navigating Identity, Racial Solidarity, and Wellness during a Pandemic

Marcia M. Liu

## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced significant stressors for Asian American college students: distance learning, financial hardship, prolonged isolation, and a spike in anti-Asian hate crimes. Simultaneously, a national reckoning has urged confrontations with anti-Blackness across institutions. The Hunter College AANAPISI Project (HCAP) provides programming attending to Hunter College's Asian American student community. This article describes COVID-19 stressors and reflections on anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism from Hunter's Asian American college students, as evaluated by HCAP's mental health specialist. It will then describe strategies HCAP implemented throughout the pandemic to engage students, as well as challenges and reflections for future programming.

## INTRODUCTION

The 1.23 million Asian Americans living in New York City (NYC) represent a populous intersection of various identity groups, where 68 percent identify as first-generation immigrants (Asian American Federation, 2018). Disaggregated data indicate that NYC's largest Asian American ethnic communities are Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, and Bangladeshi, thus representing a racially, religiously, ethnically,

and linguistically diverse landscape (NYC Department of City Planning, 2013). Currently, nearly 22 percent of NYC Asian Americans live in poverty, on par with Black (19.2 percent) and Latinx (24.2 percent) communities (NYC Mayors Office for Economic Opportunity, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everyday life in the United States for all, including Asian American college students living in NYC. Aggregately, Asian Americans had the second-highest COVID positivity rate (27.9 percent) among all racial groups in NYC (Marcello et al., 2020). In particular, Chinese New Yorkers had the highest COVID mortality rate (35.7 percent) compared to the White (33.6 percent), Black (23.7 percent), Latinx (21.7 percent), and aggregated Asian communities (25.5 percent). Dense quarantine living arrangements and a steep increase in violent hate crimes targeting Asian American New Yorkers additionally contributed to increasing student distress. Simultaneously, the 2020 global reckoning with anti-Blackness propelled widespread reflection and dialogue about structural and interpersonal racism, including within Asian American communities. As aligned with previous social movements, NYC was host to daily protests and marches during this time, bringing discussions about anti-Blackness and police brutality to various Asian American neighborhoods. Thus, as NYC Asian American college students grappled with various pandemic stressors and questions about their identity, students were suddenly in need of virtual spaces for social connection, identity exploration, and mental health aid.

One hub for NYC's Asian American college students is Hunter College, a four-year senior college of the City University of New York (CUNY) system. More than 34 percent of Hunter's undergraduate students (5,770 people) identify as Asian American, 81.2 percent of whom receive TAP Awards or Pell Grants or both (Hunter College, Office of Institutional Research, 2020, 2021a). As aligned with city demographics, the largest AAPI ethnic subgroups at Hunter are Chinese, Indian, and Filipino. Roughly 44 percent of Hunter's Asian American students are first-generation college goers, the highest proportion of all racial groups at Hunter, and almost all have at least one foreign-born parent (City University of New York, 2014).

Accordingly, the Hunter College AANAPISI Project (HCAP) provides programming attending to this diverse Asian American community, while considering positionality relative to other racial groups. In centering students from working-class and first-generation college student backgrounds, HCAP programming is aimed at students whose

narratives deviate from typical model minority themes. Housed within a vertical campus located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, HCAP provides a needed space for Asian American student engagement, enrichment, and support. Central to HCAP's mission is increasing institutional capacity for student needs using intersectional perspectives, facilitating racial and ethnic identity exploration, and designing programming specific to NYC's unique Asian American demographic. Prior to the pandemic, HCAP programming included courses in Hunter's Asian American Studies Program, student and faculty workshops focusing on Asian American experiences, and community mentoring and leadership groups. And, as the pandemic grew and students' needs evolved, HCAP grew and adapted accordingly.

To shed light on the experiences of East Coast AANAPISI students, this article will begin with an overview of the pandemic's mental health impact on Hunter's Asian American students from the vantage point of HCAP's mental health specialist. I will then discuss student reflections on anti-Blackness, before describing HCAP's efforts at developing pandemic-specific programming, including those that addressed anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism. Finally, I will close with reflections on future programming.

## **ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENT STRESSORS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Frequently overlooked, Asian American college students are often presumed to seamlessly transition through college with little need, as aligned with the model minority myth (Shih et al., 2019). It follows that Asian American college mental health has long been ignored by higher education institutions. Moreover, as with any crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced and exacerbated several mental health stressors for Hunter's Asian American student body. Hunter's Asian American student experiences are also far from monolithic, where subgroups are buffered by privilege and/or endure oppression outside and within the Asian American community, carving out varying narratives of struggle and ease. Thus, depending on one's positionality within the Asian American aggregate, mental health stressors are generally variable. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, it did follow that positionality was related to differing levels of hardship for students as well. Here we present the following stressors as identified by Hunter's Asian American students through classroom discussions, a programming needs assessment, focus groups, community meetings, cohort programming, and individual consultations with HCAP Staff.

### **Financial Stress and Economic Uncertainty**

About 86 percent of Hunter’s students commute from off-campus (Hunter College, Office of Institutional Research, 2021b), many living in multigenerational households with culturally disparate and financially dependent family members. As the COVID-19 crisis grew in NYC, many Asian Americans struggled to stay employed. Asian American unemployment rose from 2.5 percent to 15 percent in NYC, and unemployment claims filed by NYC Asian Americans increased by 10,000 percent compared to the year prior (Asian American Federation, 2021). Relatedly, students responding to a needs assessment expressed increased pressure to financially contribute to their families. For Hunter’s Asian American college seniors, postgraduation employment and financial security were additionally compromised, as funding and job opportunities became increasingly nonexistent in the changing economic context.

### **Immigration Distress**

Many of Hunter’s Asian American students were tasked with translating complex government documents, including unemployment and small business assistance applications, as well as conveying COVID testing information for family with limited English proficiency. One student shared, “[W]ell, my mother is an immigrant, I’m queer, and I’m extremely low income so that sucks too. I spend most of my time trying to help family members with stuff like unemployment, talking to landlords, etc. . . . keeping up with schoolwork is difficult.” Undocumented Asian American students were at especially heightened risk for housing and food insecurity, their families being ineligible for federal stimulus relief or unemployment benefits. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients were anxiously awaiting election results that might determine long-term authorization status, while students with undocumented parents fielded worries of family separation during a particularly hostile time for undocumented communities. And students who did have work authorizations were often given increased financial and caretaking responsibility, one HCAP mental health advocate and DACA recipient sharing in a focus group, “my dad told me, *you’re the base for this family.*”

### **Essential Workers, Grief**

Many parents of Hunter’s Asian American college students were classified as essential workers, where students experienced heightened anxiety about familial exposure to the virus, particularly for those living

in multigenerational households. One student shared in a needs assessment, “My mom is a single mom supporting three kids. She works as a physical therapist in a hospital, interacting on a daily basis with COVID patients. We’re not struggling quite yet, socioeconomically speaking; we’re teetering on the brink, and one thing going wrong could jeopardize that delicate balance.” COVID mortality and hospitalization was especially high for Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans (mortality rate = 35.7 percent) and South Asian Americans (hospitalization rate = 54.7 percent) (Marcello et al., 2020). Thus, many of Hunter’s Asian American students were worrying about, caring for, and grieving the loss of family members throughout the pandemic, though limited in their grieving rituals due to quarantine.

### **Familial Distress**

COVID-19’s long-term quarantine orders imposed heightened isolation and lack of personal space for NYC Asian American families, many crowded in small housing quarters. Students in class struggled with unstable internet connections, attending Zoom sessions in the same rooms as multiple siblings and family members. Unsurprisingly, preexisting conflict between Asian American parents and children likewise escalated as students lost access to their college community. The college environment often serves as an essential space for identity exploration and growth (Samuolis et al., 2001), and quarantine limited students to a single domain where many expressed limited connection to parts of themselves unsupported by their families. In particular, some of Hunter’s queer Asian American students shared that quarantine prevented access to safe and affirming queer spaces that protect against distress, thus heightening feelings of alienation and disconnection. One student shared in a needs assessment, “it hurts not being able to be around a community that respects my identity as LGBTQ+ and as an Asian American. I feel lonely and isolated.”

### **Racial Trauma and Race-Related Stress**

Anti-Chinese rhetoric specific to the cause and spread of COVID-19 has coincided with a rise in reported anti-Asian hate crimes and microaggressions (Anti-Defamation League, 2020). Moreover, after the March 16, 2021 shooting of six Asian American massage workers in Atlanta, Georgia, and an increase in NYC-based violence perpetrated toward Asian Americans, Hunter’s Asian American students shared in class, focus groups, and a program needs assessment that they feared

wearing a face mask, being perceived as Chinese, or being physically targeted on the sidewalk or subway. One Chinese American student shared in a focus group, “I come from Brooklyn, so it’s like an hour and 15 minutes [commuting to Hunter] of just sitting there and being alert, watching the people around me, making sure if somebody gets too close, I’m keeping an eye on them.” Another student shared in a needs assessment, “People who are not Asian, automatically assuming that I am from China or have the virus has been upsetting. In addition, since I am a female, I think the people who have targeted me think I would not retaliate or respond back to their comments, and it angers me that they think I don’t have feelings or a voice of my own.” Indeed, a recent report suggests that Asian Americans are now more distressed by anti-Asian racism than they are about the pandemic (Saw et al., 2021). And, as aligned with previous studies on vicarious racial trauma, students in a needs assessment disclosed of posttraumatic stress symptoms (e.g., hypervigilance, avoidance of public places, physical stress symptoms) after hearing reports of anti-Asian hate crimes (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019).

South Asian American students also related COVID racism with their experiences as Brown Asians in NYC (Nadal, 2019). One student shared in a needs assessment, “I feel that anti-Asian sentiment is currently more directed towards East Asians. As a Muslim . . . this is very similar persecution to the post-9/11 treatment of Muslims. It is my privilege to escape these both as I am not visibly ‘Asian’ nor am I visibly Muslim. The real fear is if my identity is exposed, then I would worry more about potential discrimination against me.” And some students expressed a heightened awareness of their highly racialized East Asian American presentation. Many felt hypervisible in their being perceived as Asian during a time when many blamed Asia for the virus. In a needs assessment, students expressed chronic pressure to denounce the “bad behaviors” of Asians elsewhere in the world as a way of separating themselves and protecting their conditional sense of being seen as American. More broadly, conversations in interpersonal spaces and classrooms induced pressure for students to serve as racial spokespeople for a broad range of pandemic-related topics.

### **Other Mental Health Concerns**

Asian American college students generally avoid seeking mental health support, while also being the most likely demographic in their age group to die by suicide (CDC, 2017; Shih et al., 2019; Stokes et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis, many students in HCAP

community discussions expressed difficulty managing mental health distress, having previously relied on the structure of college and social support of their peers. Quarantining prevented opportunities for relational intimacy, mastery, or celebration, as ruminations about one's life further escalated in isolation at home. Moreover, student survivors of trauma shared in small cohort meetings that quarantining had brought a resurgence of trauma symptoms—exacerbated by the uncertainty in the world, and limited access to movement and community.

*Student Reflections on Anti-Blackness in Asian American Communities*

The COVID-19 pandemic also coincided with a national reckoning on anti-Blackness and White supremacy. With the successive murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, a growing movement urged people to reflect on the history of violence perpetrated toward Black Americans (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). Energized by local demonstrations and protests as well as social media posts imploring conversation, some of Hunter's Asian American students reflected on their families' and friends' knowledge and understanding of anti-Blackness in the United States, some having internalized anti-Black stereotypes, or believing Asian Americans were in competition with Black Americans. Others noted that their families were progressively minded, but felt helpless in addressing anti-Black and anti-Asian racism together.

In particular, some of Hunter's Asian American students shared they lacked the knowledge and space to discuss the complexity of their racial positionality confidently and meaningfully. In a focus group, many students shared they had never formally learned about racial triangulation (Kim, 1999), prompting confusion and ambivalence as they reckoned with their own proximity to Whiteness and access to privilege, as well as their multiple experiences of oppression—racial or otherwise (e.g., being Muslim, queer, South Asian, undocumented, working class, disabled, or an English Language Learner). Students expressed nervousness that as conversations about anti-Blackness took shape, conversations about anti-Asian racism would end, as it seemed there was not collective energy for considering the relationship between both.

**INTERVENING AND ENGAGING DURING A PANDEMIC**

On March 11, 2020, Hunter College announced that it would be transitioning to remote learning as a result of the increasing risk of COVID-19 in the NYC area. As faculty, staff, and students scrambled to



acclimate themselves with online technology and working from home, HCAP likewise began to transition. Since then, HCAP has aimed to provide a consistent online presence and space for students, while initiating programming that addresses the context of the last two years. Here we offer four strategies in our pandemic programming that address mental health, anti-Asian racism, and anti-Blackness. We note our challenges in launching and continuing these efforts, as well as recommendations for engaging Asian American students.

#### Strategy 1: Normalizing Mental Health Stress in Every Context

Throughout the last two years, HCAP has sought to consistently destigmatize conversations about distress, trauma, and hopelessness, whether related to the pandemic, the increase in anti-Asian racism, or other stressors. Thus, in every space where we interface with students, HCAP has held conversations about mental health and coping. For example, in HCAP sections of undergraduate classes, class time was reserved for processing the transition to online learning, the disruptive impact of the virus, as well as growing fears of anti-Asian hate crimes. Reserving class time to acknowledge distress as an acceptable and legitimate reaction to the world context was crucial for helping students acknowledge their own stress, while also encouraging public conversations about race and mental health.

Outside the classroom, staff consistently checked in with students about their mental health as well. Staff acknowledged their own reactions to the transition with students, modeling vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness. Various mental health check-ins were hosted for students to discuss the impact of the pandemic and the increase in anti-Asian violence, and HCAP cohort programming integrated mental health discussions throughout their respective curricula. We also created social media infographics focused on mental health and wellness, and uploaded instructional videos specific to our student community for increasing mindfulness and distress tolerance, handling familial conflict during quarantine, setting boundaries, and acknowledging racial trauma (see for examples: <https://huntercap.org/category/blog/ask-hcap/>).

Further, in an effort to broaden mental health conversations, HCAP presented to Hunter's interdisciplinary Faculty Teaching Seminar, encouraging faculty to normalize students' distress and acknowledge the increase in anti-Asian violence in their classrooms. Then, in our own Faculty Seminar Series, HCAP gave participants

information for navigating mental health conversations in the classroom, and facilitated discussion on pedagogical techniques for supporting Asian American students. Staff discussed their desire to better understand Asian American student needs, while also exploring their identities and boundaries as instructors.

Moreover, in the wake of the Atlanta shooting, HCAP hosted a student processing space for discussing the impact of racial trauma, as well as two online community trainings for responding to anti-Asian harassment. Expert consultants facilitated the trainings and offered psychoeducation about how public acts of violence impact mental health. Attendees commented in the chat with gratitude for having gained concrete skills given the heightened vigilance many were feeling in public. HCAP sought to normalize such worries as legitimate and worthy of community acknowledgment and action.

Each of these mental health conversations required nuance and comfort with discussing vulnerable topics. Some students and faculty felt uncomfortable with disclosing of their stress, especially as remote learning spaces often felt more disconnected. Also, some faculty and staff may prefer not to engage with students about their mental health, preferring to direct students to campus counseling services. We note that one can destigmatize mental health in many ways, including acknowledging this exceptionally stressful time, sharing resources about mental health (including disseminating information about counseling services), hosting a staff member from counseling services to share about the service, building student community within the classroom, and referring students to the counseling service if needed.

### Strategy 2: Giving Voice to Student Experiences and Helping Them Give Voice to Others

Both the pandemic and the increase in anti-Asian racism generated a significant decrease in agency for Hunter's students. As noted by others, giving voice to experiences of oppression and dispossession is one intervention that can reestablish power and agency, build community and solidarity, and restore identity and connection with one's self (Goodman et al., 2004). Especially as distance learning disrupted in-person gatherings, HCAP sought to maintain and grow our student community by facilitating online cohorts that could affirm diverse student narratives remotely. The following are three examples of how we facilitated these efforts. Examples of these student projects can be seen at <https://huntercap.org/hcap-student-led-projects/>.

The HCAP Community Mentoring Program (CMP) provides professional development and peer mentorship. Broadly, the group serves to help students reflect on their racial identities and learn about Asian American community issues, while also growing skills in networking and career exploration. When Hunter transitioned to online learning, the students created a digital exhibit of self-portraits. Each portrait had a theme, where students explored allyship, solidarity, racial justice, and systems of oppression. One CMP student wrote, “So far this year, I have gone through a difficult learning curve-- one that has allowed me to break out of my shell, shed my skin, and find my voice. Ever since I was young, it was habitual for me to justify and excuse any offenses directed towards me. Over time, this took its toll as it affected my daily activities, it became daunting for me to speak what was on my mind and I often doubted if what I had to say mattered-- surely the words I encased in my head that desperately needed to be heard were futile, right?” The students also worked on an oral history project, documenting the stories of those connected to Hunter’s Asian American Studies Program. These stories highlighted the struggles and resilience of the program’s faculty and alumni, as well as the program’s current students, all being Asian Americans finding a place at Hunter and in society more broadly.

The HCAP Leaders Program is another cohort that focuses on building leadership skills and assisting others in navigating college. To spread awareness and affirm Asian American stories, the group created a digital zine documenting their personal experiences during the pandemic, sharing practical guidance for coping. Zine topics discussed challenges and strategies for survival, distance learning and self-care, shifting familial dynamics at home, being an immigrant student at this time, and addressing anti-Blackness, anti-Asian racism, and sexual assault. By giving voice to their own experiences, the students hoped to give voice to other students who share their story, but who may be in isolation during quarantine. One HCAP Leader shared in a focus group, “I think writing that piece made me feel like maybe I could be the one, teaching other people about anti-Blackness, and how this issue has been deeply rooted in the system.” The zine included encouraged the student community, stating, “No matter what your situation is, please know that you are in the middle of the pandemic. Making decisions during a time of uncertainty can be difficult, and it is totally okay to be unsure. You can be unsure about school, about family, and anything in life, because we are all unsure.”

Finally, the HCAP mental health advocates are a third cohort that focuses on the mental health stressors of Asian American students at Hunter. The group discussed topics personal to them and other students, including intergenerational conflict, self-esteem and imposter phenomenon, mental health stigma, and racial trauma. In an effort to destigmatize the widespread mental health impact of the pandemic and to address the increase in anti-Asian violence, the advocates created an Instagram series called *HCAP Voices*. Here students interviewed other students about their mental health experiences, selecting quotes to be posted anonymously online. Here are four excerpts:

*"I have 4 people and 1 dog in a 2-bedroom apartment. It's very claustrophobic and kind of uncomfortable. There was some tension initially because we are all in this apartment. It was just terrible. I felt like I couldn't have air or go outside for a walk. Being Asian of Chinese descent also added to it. . . . There was a sense of fear when I went out due to racially charged attacks. One day at work, two people yelled at me and said rude things about Chinese people. I was traumatized especially since it happened all in one day and in NYC. The world has changed so much. "*

*"I don't know how to take care of myself. I'm worried about what my parents are doing, and if what I'm doing lives up to their sacrifice. It's a huge and very scary pressure. You can never be good enough for someone who gave up their whole life for you. You can never repay that. The one thing I can do is live happily and successfully. But, that's such BS when you're a child of immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants. Like be happy? So what?"*

*"As a queer and trans person who has never come out to their parents, quarantine has been difficult for my mental health. A lot of my college years have been about figuring out and being honest to myself about all my identities. A big reason I was able to be so open was thanks to the friends who always made sure to have an inviting space. Having to go backwards and hide these identities from the people around me has been a unique challenge that I didn't expect to have until the pandemic."*

*"I also worry about the mental health of my parents, especially my father. At the height of COVID, his job came to a halt with no timeline of when he would be able to work again. I know that not working or being physically active took a toll on him. Losing friends and family during the pandemic was also rough. My dad will never discuss how he feels about it, perhaps because of how he was raised, as he never wanted to be vulnerable in front of us. Nevertheless, I often see his eyes wet after*

*he finishes his daily prayers, tears from words he only shares whilst in prostration. The Bengali culture of his generation taught people to mask their emotions and minimize talk about mental health."*

Broadly, the online community space continues to be challenging for engaging students, particularly as Zoom fatigue grows. Students crave in-person interactions for being seen and known, and online forums can feel impotent in replicating the intimacy and solidarity building that typify in-person community events. However, the online format also provides accessibility for those whom in-person gatherings may be physically or emotionally challenging. Moreover, by finding ways for students to facilitate their own talents and interests, they were able to feel empowered and energized. In addition, by telling their stories and soliciting others' experiences, they were able to deepen their own identity exploration and build connections with the broader Asian American community.

### Strategy 3: Ongoing Assessment for Future Programming, Acknowledgment of World Events

As pandemic needs evolved, HCAP sought to understand how we could adapt and better support our students. To this end, we conducted a needs assessment asking students to share about their race-related stress, intersecting identities, and mental health. Of the 109 respondents, 39 (35.8 percent) reported personally experiencing or witnessing at least one anti-Asian racism event. A vast majority (82.5 percent) worried about their family or friends being targeted, 61.4 percent feeling unsure of how to respond if attacked, and many reporting hopelessness (35.8 percent) and physical stress symptoms (26.5 percent) due to the attacks. We also learned of students' financial stress, as many were suddenly unemployed due to the quarantine. HCAP subsequently guided programming to address stressors identified in the survey, specifically: creating social media guides on addressing microaggressions, hosting events for combatting anti-Asian harassment, and providing stipends to alleviate some of the quarantine's financial burden.

Separately, HCAP was consistently vocal through our social media accounts, newsletter, and website in speaking out about the ongoing political and public health climate. For example, we wrote to our students encouraging them to participate in the 2020 census and election: "As AAPI young people, we know many of you have served as bicultural brokers in your families before. We encourage you to discuss your

plans for voting in person or by mail, as well as participating in the census, with your friends and family.” We vocalized our solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives: “As a program supporting underserved Asian American, Pacific Islander, first generation college students and students from immigrant families, HCAP stands in solidarity as we interrogate the ways Asian Americans are employed as racial wedges to deny persistent structural barriers faced by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities.” And we addressed anti-Asian racism in the wake of the Georgia massage parlor shooting: “This past year’s heightened xenophobia and anti-Asian racism is not new. Often missing in our US history textbooks, the history of trauma and oppression of our diverse Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities must be remembered and retold.” Similarly, the first session of our Faculty Seminar Series took place the day after the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol. Here we adapted our programming, where faculty began the workshop by participating in a mindfulness exercise, and then shared reactions to the news and how it would impact their students.

As such, HCAP aimed to consistently better our understanding of student needs, and name the context we were working within, identifying the lived experiences of our students whenever possible to increase belonging and safety. Central to these interventions is acknowledging that Asian American students are far from monolithic, where individuals occupy various positionalities and require tailored approaches for establishing community. Regularly soliciting student input regarding mental health needs and identity will dispel assumptions of model minority status and can direct more effective programming. Moreover, acknowledging the world context as relevant to students’ lives will fortify belongingness, and validate their struggles as worthy of support and action.

#### Strategy 4: Addressing Anti-Blackness by Naming AAPI Positionality and Cultivating Space

Asian American identity has been informed by anti-Blackness and White supremacy throughout the last three hundred years. Positioned as a wedge to divide White and Black communities, the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotype have together isolated Asian American communities from other communities of color, denied structural and interpersonal manifestations of anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism, and maintained Asian American positionality as squarely outside the U.S. body politic (Kim, 1999).

To help students better understand Asian American positionality and confront anti-Blackness as it relates to Asian American identity, HCAP Asian American Studies curricula integrate discussion on racial triangulation in the United States. Such course material supplies students with examples of how historical U.S.-Asian relationships, ongoing civil rights movements, and various efforts to stoke competition between groups have impacted Asian American and Black relationships and respective power. In response, many students shared of their relief, now having the historical knowledge and language to contextualize relationships between Asian American and Black communities, using nuance often lost in the media (Kim, 1999; Lee et al., 2020; Yellow Horse et al., 2021).

HCAP cohort spaces also integrated conversations about anti-Blackness into their curricula, such that students could identify and process feelings of ambivalence, shame, confusion, anger, and hope. We hosted two workshops focused on understanding the relationship between anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, as well as confronting anti-Blackness in one's self and community. Students across HCAP cohorts expressed a firm desire to learn more and work in solidarity toward dismantling and confronting anti-Blackness in their lives, while also bringing awareness and resisting against anti-Asian racism, too. In a focus group, one HCAP mental health advocate shared, "I think [the workshops] really allowed me to navigate [Asians'] ambiguous position. I couldn't feel the extent of the emotions that some Black people were feeling during this time, and also, I have to deal with anti-Blackness in my own home. Attending these workshops helped me navigate this position. Having that space where other people felt the same way, had the same questions or concerns, helped to validate my own experience, and open up the conversation on how I can be an ally." Another HCAP leader shared, "I enjoyed those conversations a lot because there are some long deep-rooted issues that we might feel ashamed to bring up, but you know it's necessary to talk about things like that to try to clean the problem from the root." Overall, students appreciated the opportunity to ask questions and learn about anti-Blackness and strategies for meaningful allyship, in a space that also essentially addressed their identities as Asian Americans.

For some, addressing anti-Blackness within the Asian American community can be challenging. Some may experience conversations about triangulation as a denial of the racism that Asian Americans experience, whereas others may blame various Asian American

subgroups for harboring anti-Black attitudes. We note that relating anti-Asian racism to anti-Blackness, and providing space for processing complex feelings in a small group, is essential for challenging zero-sum game notions of competition, and allowing this urgent conversation to deepen. Moreover, we advocate for modeling solidarity and speaking out about anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism as strategies for growing our students' understanding and efficacy in identifying the root structures of White supremacy in their environments.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the Asian American community, and the changing sociopolitical climate has also urged confrontations with both anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism. Working at the center of vibrant Asian American student communities, AANAPISIs have the unique opportunity to address the ongoing health crisis as well as the evolving racial climate and apply innovative programming. Future efforts aimed at effectively supporting the mental health of Asian American students would thus be well served in observing the work of AANAPISI communities. In particular, by normalizing mental health conversations, giving voice to student narratives, publicly acknowledging the racial climate, doing ongoing needs assessments, and creating space for teaching and reflecting on anti-Blackness, institutions will be better equipped for serving their Asian American students in remote and in-person settings, while acknowledging their diversity and specific lived experiences.

Although we now better understand the needs of our faculty and students, we also highlight the many hurdles for supporting a community remotely. Here are a few challenges we encountered, and how we might resolve them in the future.

1. We had significant difficulty recruiting students for drop-in events. Visiting online classes where students are already gathered might help reach people, especially when discussing vulnerable topics of mental health and race, rather than waiting for students to self-select.
2. Screen fatigue was difficult to overcome in every space we encountered, as well as for ourselves. Offering breaks and free time for students and faculty to work independently and physically move their bodies was crucial for continued engagement.
3. Managing classrooms and seminars online was also difficult. Ensuring that everyone felt heard and understood was



challenging especially when participants' screens were off and internet connections were unstable. Having never met many of our students and faculty seminar participants in person, we were at times uncertain about their experiences of our programming. We attempted to gather impressions through postevent assessments and individual check-ins as an alternative method of maintaining connection.

4. Faculty in our seminars had differing levels of comfort in discussing political beliefs and mental health, during an emotionally charged time for both. Allowing for thoughtfully facilitated discussions and more time for small group and one-on-one interactions, even online, helped ensure people could understand and hear each other.

As we pursue our next semesters, we aim to design new and further specialized programming for student subgroups (e.g., queer students, transfer students, women, STEM students). We hope to challenge our faculty to actively promote mental health more in their classrooms and continue galvanizing our community online and in person. Ultimately, whether working on screen or face-to-face, it will be paramount that institutions give voice to nuanced and diverse Asian American student stories, empowering them to take space, build community, and be known.

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MARCIA LIU, Ph.D. is a Counseling Psychologist and Mental Health Specialist for the Hunter College AANAPISI Project (HCAP). As Mental Health Specialist she focuses on destigmatizing conversations about Asian American mental health and building institutional awareness of Asian American student needs. She also has a small psychotherapy practice and is a national advisor for The Steve Fund.