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# Seeding Change from Within:
## An Exploration of Activism at the Local Level

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**ABSTRACT**

Grace Lee Boggs suggested that activism must move beyond protest. Rather than action from above, she believed that change takes place at the local level through small actions. In this practitioner essay, the staff of the Asian Pacific American Resource Center at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities explores the multiple dimensions of local action we engaged in with students and colleagues to advance social justice for Asian American and Pacific Islander students. We highlight some of our work toward addressing anti-Asian racism and anti-Blackness on our campus and local community; building community and solidarity across racial-ethnic communities; participating with student groups as partners to challenge inequality; and engaging as a "critical collaborator" with other campus units to advance the institution's goals toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Against the backdrop of the anti-Asian racism instigated by COVID-19 that received little attention and the murder of George Floyd in our "backyard" that garnered widespread outcry, we argue that we were able to productively respond because we nurtured relationships and other actions over several years of local activism. Our explication significantly advances an understanding of the role of Asian American Native American Pacific Islander–serving institutions in activism at the local level that is critical for institutional change.

## INTRODUCTION

The Asian Pacific American Resource Center (APARC) was established in 2016 when the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (UMN) received its first Asian American Native American Pacific Islander–serving institutions (AANAPISI) award. It came against the backdrop of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student criticism that the institution was not serving its AAPI students, who comprised 10 percent of the undergraduate population (Chaduvula & Farniok, 2015; Gonzales, 2015). From the start, APARC was institutionalized through funding support for the center's space renovation and facilities fees (e.g., space rental and utilities). It aimed to provide culturally relevant programming, support, and resources to AAPI students attending UMN. Beyond a physical location to host events and house academic support services, the development of APARC was predicated on engaging AAPI students in collective struggles and interconnected identities. Our programs strive to educate and engage students to recognize social inequities and nurture their capacities as change agents. APARC serves as a space where seeding change begins with centering the identities and experiences of AAPI students through our mission, vision, and programming.

In this essay, the staff of the APARC at UMN explores the multiple dimensions of local action we engaged in with students and colleagues to advance social justice for AAPI students. We highlight some of our work toward addressing anti-Asian racism and anti-Blackness on our campus and local community; building community and solidarity across racial-ethnic communities; participating with student groups as partners to challenge inequity; and engaging as a "critical collaborator" with other campus units to advance the institution's goals toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Against the backdrop of the anti-Asian racism instigated by COVID-19 that received little attention and the murder of George Floyd in our "backyard" that garnered widespread outcry, we argue that we were able to productively respond because we nurtured relationships and other action over several years of local activism. Our explication significantly advances an understanding of the role of AANAPISIs in activism at the local level that is critical for institutional change.

Grace Lee Boggs (2007) suggested that activism must move beyond protest. Rather than action from above, she believed that change takes place at the local level through small actions. Change can be realized by "doing small things at the local level, like planting

community gardens or looking out for our neighbors'' (Boggs, 2007, para. 9). In this essay, we identify three levels where we have seeded change: individual students, student organizations, and the institution. We explicate the ways in which APARC's "small activities" at different levels of interactions are critical for working toward institutional change. Specifically, we offer three key strategies in which student affairs administrators can utilize to seed change across the higher education institution. First, change is seeded with individual students through engaging in *mutuality between staff and students*. Second, change is seeded with student organizations through fostering *critical student-staff partnerships*. Third, change is seeded at the institutional level through conceptualizing student support programs as *levers for racial justice*.

## SEEDING CHANGE WITH STUDENTS: ENGAGING IN MUTUALITY

One of the cornerstone programs at APARC is the Asian American and Pacific Islander Students Promoting Inspiration, Resilience, and Empowerment (ASPIRE) Peer Mentoring Program. ASPIRE is a space intentionally crafted to provide guidance for first- and second-year students to adjust to and get to know the university, facilitate educational workshops about AAPI history and contemporary issues, and build relationships between peers. ASPIRE is grounded in student-centered and student-led programming and curriculum. Rather than traditional one-on-one pairing models, ASPIRE uses a multilayered and communal-based structure wherein students are matched through three different ways: one-to-one, family groups, and houses. The various mentoring models facilitate extended connections between students and allow for mentees to be supported by mentors beyond their one-to-one match.

For example, consider Kimmie, who participated in ASPIRE her first year as a mentee, shifted to a role as a mentor in her second year, and eventually took on the role of a student coordinator in the mentoring program. As Kimmie explained it, while her family has been able to support her in many ways, they did not have the social capital (Yosso, 2005) to help her navigate and negotiate the university institution. This yearning for support and the desire for community motivated Kimmie to join ASPIRE. It was important to Kimmie that program staff were committed to her growth, shared resources with her, and cared about her mental and emotional health. She further noted, "I just felt so supported by the Program Coordinator like close enough that I feel like

he has become a friend despite him being an older figure, because I'm so scared of authority but in APARC, it's just different, like everyone's my friend." Although Kimmie generally feared authority and those older than her, she understood her relationship with staff as one rooted in care. Her descriptor of staff as her "friend" suggests a relationship of mutuality between staff and student that is different from typical staff-student relationships.

One way in which APARC staff engage in mutuality is through multimodal storytelling within programs like ASPIRE that center personal history and cultural knowledge. Our storytelling includes counterstorytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) that allows our minoritized AAPI community to speak back against oppressive dominant discourses. By participating with students in the mutual exchange of personal stories, staff engage in practices of vulnerability that "transgress[] the boundaries of the adult professional role by violating the unspoken rule that you should separate your personal life from professional activities" (Ginwright, 2005, p. 107). Staff reciprocating vulnerability opens up opportunities to deepen relationships with students, allowing students and staff to be in relation together as what Kimmie describes as "another human being." Student-staff mutuality redefines the role that staff can take as adult partners, which is critically important for assisting students navigate a predominantly white institution such as UMN.

Amidst the uprisings in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd, Kimmie shared that while she previously learned about Black-Asian movements, the latest police killing of Mr. Floyd "was the first time that it was so close to home and all up in [her] face." Across social media platforms, AAPI communities wrestled with making visible increasing anti-Asian violence during COVID-19 and amplifying the call to defund the police in the face of continued police brutality against Black communities. As activists pushed for solidarity and demanded that communities of color grapple with their complicity in anti-Blackness, Kimmie struggled with guilt. She also noticed her AAPI peer circle were shaming each other for not doing enough to respond to George Floyd's murder. Kimmie "wanted a more productive community-oriented way to do activism that didn't result in us just shaming each other" and thus turned to APARC staff and ASPIRE peers.

Subsequently, she created the Facebook group "Yellow Peril Supports Black Power" as a space to dialogue and share resources

for the Asian American community to engage in the movement for Black lives. After an APARC staff raised concerns to Kimmie about the group's name, she renamed it to "Asian America for Black Power." As she reflected on the staff's critique, Kimmie shared, "I felt like I was being questioned in a way that wasn't attacking me for what I didn't know—But just raising this concern. We're community-oriented so if there are concerns, we should address it. So I didn't think it was a big deal at all because of how gentle we were to one another and to me." APARC staff's loving critique of the name of Kimmie's Facebook group reflected an honesty similar to the ways in which family members are often forthright about their criticisms. Rather than tell white lies or avoid difficult conversations that may hurt feelings, staff engage students in conversations to critically explore their actions. Kimmie shared that her conversation with APARC staff helped her realize the need to "focus on our Black community and our Black siblings [because] it's not about us" and create another avenue to interrogate how the privileges of Asian Americans are maintained through anti-Blackness. She elaborated that her beliefs around advocacy and activism shifted from an individualistic focus to a collective ethos wherein everyone holds each other accountable.

**Seeding Change with Student Organizations: Fostering Student-Staff Partnerships**

Critical student-staff partnerships, also known as instrumental relationships, focus on working relationships between youths and adults in learning environments (Halpern, 2005). These partnerships explore the idea that responsibilities are shared by individuals involved in an activity and grapple with the reality that young people and adult staff hold asymmetrical power and knowledge (Camino, 2005; Halpern, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2005). "Critical" student-staff partnerships require those involved to work through sociopolitical tensions (Camino, 2005). It recognizes students and staff are not passive participants in their engagements, but rather active and contribute in their own capacities, whether big or small. As Kimmie articulated, "It's not about competition or who knows the best or who has the most. . . we're just supporting one another whenever we can, [it] reminds me of like a family or a potluck." Similar to a potluck, we see the knowledge we bring to AAPI student support as relevant to the work of AAPI student organizations on campus and view the work of APARC as complementary to the work of student organizations (Halpern, 2005).

For instance, consider our collaboration with the Asian-American Student Union (ASU), a UMN student organization and cultural center. For example, APARC staff and student organizations engaged in a "potluck" partnership at the end of spring 2020 when our campus transitioned to distance learning. The Office for Multicultural Student Engagement notified our staff about an upcoming town hall meeting organized by the student union's nine student cultural centers[1] to discuss a lawsuit against UMN. Specifically, the lawsuit challenged UMN's support of student organizations through the allocation of student fees to them, among other policies and practices. UMN "treats the cultural centers as legacies with rights against termination of their leases" (Fairecloth, 2020), wherein the student cultural centers have rights to their space even after their lease ends. The student leaders worried about the impact of the lawsuit on the student cultural centers and were upset about the lack of information from the administration.

Before the town hall meeting, APARC staff connected with the Asian American Student Union (ASU), one of the nine student organizations impacted by the lawsuit that organized the town hall meeting, to discuss their concerns. It became clear to us that students wanted to know more details about the lawsuit and were anxious about the possibility of the elimination of the student cultural centers. In our engagement with the student groups at the town hall, we provided an overview of the lawsuit and talked through student leaders' concerns. We reminded them that they have power in numbers and affirmed that their voices are important and should be heard by the university. We intentionally shifted the discussion from a reactive approach to a proactive one by focusing on the need to bring awareness to the important role of cultural centers on university campuses, including the ways in which colleges and universities fund cultural centers. We emphasized the importance of pointing out that cultural centers do not simply exist for the sake of "political correctness" as cited by the plaintiffs. Rather, cultural centers provide minoritized students with a "homeplace" (hooks, 1992)—spaces to nurture connection and belonging.

In a second instance, APARC staff and ASU collaborated to cohost the annual Midwest Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Students Union (MAASU) 2020 Conference, a large conference organized by student organizations from midwestern universities that consistently draws more than 700 attendees. The pandemic necessitated shifting MAASU to a virtual conference for 2020, which opened up new opportunities and challenges. ASU students developed and managed the

thematic content of the conference. APARC staff drew on experience hosting conferences and provided support for marketing, guidance during regular planning meetings, and logistical support throughout the conference. APARC full-time staff and graduate assistant staff created the virtual infrastructure, and APARC undergraduate student workers served as technical support for workshop facilitators.

The death of George Floyd and the uprising against police brutality forced a pivotal turn in the planning of the MAASU conference. Student leaders felt the urgency for MAASU to be a space for processing and uncovering conversations about AAPI and Black solidarity. They urged conference facilitators to incorporate and make connections between anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism. The leaders led a series of Black Lives Matter (BLM) breakout rooms on topics such as Mutual Aid, Protesting and Direct Action, Accountability and Transparency, Community Safety without Policing, and Afro-Asian Solidarity. The messaging on the criticality of Black and Asian solidarity was explicitly and purposefully incorporated into the structure of the conference: it stated that MAASU supported BLM, and encouraged participants to reflect on their own identities, positionalities, and roles in the movement for Black lives.

Significantly, student leaders were concerned about participants potentially derailing conversations during the breakout spaces and asked for APARC staff presence. This concern ended up playing out in one breakout session, wherein a White attendee began to dominate and derail a conversation on mutual aid. The staff member in the breakout session intervened by reminding the attendees to be mindful of positionality and sharing space. Notably, an Asian American student in the same session privately thanked the staff member for stepping in to safeguard the focus of the session and space for AAPI student participation.

**Seeding Change at the Institutional Level: Conceptualizing Programs as Levers for Justice**

As a resource center within the structures of the UMN, we are afforded certain forms of access, influence, and platforms to engage with institutional decision makers. As a strategy to seed change at the institutional level, we conceptualize the institutional-level work of APARC as a *lever for racial justice*. Levers move a firmly fixed structure from one direction to another. As a lever, we engage resources and leverage our position within the UMN to advocate for institutional

change to better serve AAPI and other minoritized communities. We bring attention to policies and practices that impinge on the racial and ethnic identities of AAPI students; develop cross-functional partnerships with other department offices; and use our expertise about AAPI students, families, and experiences to navigate university politics to support the fight for racial justice even within the often-stringent norms and expectations of higher education institutions.

As COVID-19 infections intensified during spring of 2020, students alerted us to an anti-Asian racist and xenophobic incident involving undergraduate student volunteers who served as ambassadors to prospective students as part of an outreach program of the Office of Admissions. During a professional development retreat involving the student ambassadors, a group of students performed a skit where one student played the role of a student studying abroad in China and became infected with COVID-19. The student returned to UMN and spread COVID-19, turning everyone (remaining students in the group) into zombies (Snow, 2020). The skit was performed in front of the entire Admissions Ambassador group, in the presence of a university staff member. No one disrupted the racist and xenophobic message of the skit.

As a lever for racial justice, APARC amplifed the voices of students and brought attention to the racist and xenophobic nature of the skit and how it contributed to a racially hostile campus environment for AAPI students and Asian international students. For example, APARC released a public statement condemning the skit and used social media and e-mail networks to build visibility. An excerpt from the statement underscores connections to the history of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in the United States:

> APARC is deeply disappointed that a group of student leaders from the Office of Admissions, who serve as critical first touchpoints for University of Minnesota prospective students and families, made light of a global health concern and perpetuated xenophobia and stereotypes of Asian heritage communities. In times of crisis U.S. history is filled with xenophobic hate, violence and policies that target individuals who resemble or are assumed to be from particular countries or groups involved in the crisis situation (e.g., 9/11 Islamophobia, WWII Internment of Japanese Americans). Similar to public health emergencies such as the 2003 SARS and 2014 Ebola outbreaks, we are seeing increased racial prejudice and violence with COVID-19.

APARC also connected with staff members in the Office of Admissions to discuss their perspectives and brainstorm ways to resolve the issue. This was particularly important because some staff in the Admissions Office were very resistant to conversations about racism in the Admissions Ambassadors program. An Asian American student who was part of the Admission Ambassadors program shared with APARC staff that some of the staff in the program "shut students out" when some of them raised concerns about the skit. APARC organized meetings with students to communicate their concerns to leadership and develop training curriculum on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for the Admissions Ambassadors program, both in response to the skit and to promote DEI values more broadly. Further, APARC reached out to the Vice President of the Office of Equity and Diversity and other student support units to discuss the problematic skit, concerns of the AAPI community, and ways forward to change policies and practices.[2]

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and Minneapolis Uprising and anti-Asian violence, we deliberated about how the work of the center can advance the movement for Black lives and strengthen solidarity between Asian American and Black communities. One way that the AANAPISI program has helped us begin to address anti-Blackness is through the creation of a university course (launched Fall 2021) that examines, interrogates, and chronicles Black and Asian solidarity. We collaborated with the UMN's Asian American Studies Program and a local community organization to develop a course, "Black-Asian Solidarity and Community." The course examines the historical and contemporary relations between Black and Asian American communities. It names and deconstructs anti-Blackness in Asian American communities. This is especially critical as police officer Tou Thao's complicity in the killing of George Floyd rendered clear the persistence of anti-Black ideologies (Onishi, 2020). The course further analyzes the erasure of anti-Asian rhetoric and violence that has long marked this country's history (Lee, 2015). It illuminates the intersections that exist and have existed across both Black and Asian American communities, with a vision of shared liberation. To further ground the course in our local context, a local community activist is serving as the inaugural instructor of the course. It is anticipated that this course will become a permanent fixture in the Asian American Studies roster.

As a lever for racial justice, we understand that institutional change is difficult, laborious, and necessitates a long view. As a lever, APARC seeds change that influence mindsets, policies, practices,

programs, and the institution as a whole. In the example of the racist skit, we were able to connect with Asian American students in the Admissions ambassador program who now know that they can turn to APARC for advocacy. Furthermore, we underscored the lack of a DEI framework in a university program with a significant public-facing presence and contributed to establishing a conversation on anti-Asian and Sinophobic sentiments on our campus. The development of the course on Afro-Asian solidarity creates new sites of possibility in this work against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism; and allows the work of APARC to confront and resist anti-Asian and anti-Black racism within the official curriculum (Apple, 1979) of the university.

**CONCLUSION**

Boggs (2007) maintained, "Acting locally allows us to be inside the movement and flow of the system. Changes in small places affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness" (para. 12). As we reflect on the work of the APARC, we suggest that our local actions are vital to the work of antiracism and seeding change across communities in ways that attend to the multiple levels of our institution. While the work to dismantle oppressive structures often focuses on the "big picture," APARC recognizes that it is imperative to attend to the "small places" of the complex system of a higher education institution. At UMN, APARC's work to advance social justice involves local action with individual students, student organizations, and campus units (e.g., departments, offices, programs, and colleges).

At the individual student level of seeding change, Kimmie's story demonstrates the enduring need to build and sustain mutual relationships with our students. Our experiences with the students we serve remind us of the necessity to prioritize care and community in our work. Kimmie's experiences underline the significance of developing different forms of reciprocal relationships, whether it is between a staff and a student, a mentor and a mentee, and among students. This emphasis on mutuality is nuanced in our strategy to foster critical student-staff partnerships with student organizations on campus. Kimmie's metaphor of our work with students as a potluck highlights the varying knowledges and expertise students and staff bring to an activity. In our work with student organizations, seeding change required APARC staff to engage with students purposefully, to nurture a collaborative partnership. Our student-staff partnerships meant

recognizing that students have important views, knowledge, and experiences to contribute while understanding staff have significant skills and insights that are important for supporting students to reach their goals. Further, as a lever for racial justice, APARC's approach to seeding change at the institutional level recognizes the center is one part of numerous parts that make up the higher education institution. Because seeding change requires moving various components of the institution, we must collaborate with units within the institution as well as outside the institution. As a lever, we cannot and do not need to do all the work, but we must induce movement. APARC has done so by connecting with other units, engaging in difficult conversations, advocating for AAPI students and communities, and infusing into the institution different ways for understanding its work (e.g., new course on Afro-Asian solidarity).

Given the increasing incidents of anti-Asian racism, continued police brutality and pervasive anti-Blackness, it is evermore imperative to understand the work of AANAPISIs as seeding change toward social justice. As we work to nuance understandings of the interconnectedness of AAPI *and* Black oppression, we must also shift our view on the ways that action toward social justice can take place. Further, we suggest that considerations of what it means to seed change at the institutional level must interrogate the tensions of simultaneously being *within* the fabric of the institution and working *against* its institutional racism among other oppressive structures of white supremacy.

We suggest student affairs professionals and researchers attend to questions such as: How have individuals and units engaged in non-traditional forms of activism? How might higher education institutions nurture solidarity and movement building across racial-ethnic boundaries? How are student affairs professionals responding to injustices instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic with local actions? Understanding work toward social justice as seeding change may help us better understand the continuum through which we may "create the world anew" (Boggs & Kurashige, 2021, p. 51).

## NOTES

1.  The nine cultural centers include American Indian Student Cultural Center (AISCC), Asian American Student Union (ASU), Black Student Union (BSU), Disabled Student Cultural Center (DSCC), La Raza Student Cultural Center, Queer Student Cultural Center (QSCC), Al-Madinah Student Cultural Center (AMCC), Minnesota International Student Association (MISA), and Feminist Student Activist Collective (FSAC).

2.  The situation remains ongoing because the incident coincided with the surge of COVID-19 cases in the United States, and the transition of UMN to remote operations while we were planning to directly address the incident with participants and administrators. The Office of Admissions disbanded the student ambassador program due to the uncertainties of the pandemic.

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