**By Arlene Sudaria Daus-Magbual**

# Being Grounded with an Ethnic Studies Legacy: ASPIRE SFSU

## Introduction

**ONE EVENING IN 1991**, my mother told my older brother that if he wanted to go out he had to take me with him. I was in the eighth grade, and my brother was a sophomore in high school. Our mother dropped us off at University of California, Riverside (UCR), and we went into a meeting for high school students hosted by the UCR Asian Pacific Student Programs (APSP). We all sat in a circle, Roland Coloma, who was the APSP Coordinator, asked us to introduce ourselves. Everyone represented Asian Student Clubs from different high schools from Riverside Unified School District (RUSD). The theme of the meeting was Filipino American history, and we watched a movie focused on Filipinos in Louisiana. I was captivated. My intuition told me that I was in the right place as a hunger to want to know and learn more about my history began.

APSP, like many race-centered student programming prior to federal minority-serving funding, was created in 1989 from student protests and coalition building intended to create services for underserved students of color in higher education, including Asian American and Pacific Islander (AA&PI) students on campus. APSP coordinators, Vesi Save and April Veneracion, became mentors to me in high school and convinced me to attend UCR for college. Their involvement led me to be engaged in college as a student leader and encouraged me to utilize the services offered by APSP. Emilio Joe Virata, the Director at the time, taught me the meaning of being a leader with my peers. I am indebted to this program for the mentorship I received as it shaped me into a scholar, activist, organizer, and now professional conducting similar work with AA&PI students at San Francisco State University (SFSU).

Interventions and services that center on race and ethnicity play a central role in college student development. I begin with this reflection as it highlights the long-term impact of culturally relevant programming for educational leaders of color, particularly Ethnic Studies.

Throughout, I name my mentors in this narrative to pay homage to those who fought before and continue to fight for social justice alongside me. These relationships are paramount in guiding my leadership, mentorship, and teaching as I raise the next generation of scholar activists. In the following, I discuss how relationships are central in enacting an Ethnic Studies pedagogy in my role as a student affairs administrator charged with the development and implementation of AA&PI Student Services-Asian American and Pacific Islander Retention and Education (ASPIRE), the first Asian American Native American and Pacific Islander (AANAPISI) funded program at SFSU.

## Ethnic Studies at the Center

**AFTER GRADUATING FROM UCR**, I worked as an organizer in Los Angeles. Based on my work, a colleague of mine, Ryan Yokota, recommended, "Go to grad school at SFSU, the birthplace of Ethnic Studies and look out for Dr. Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales. She'll take care of you." Little did I know that leaving my work and family in southern California would change the trajectory of my life. I continued my journey to know more about my history and identity as a Pinay through pursuing the Asian American Studies (AAS) master's program and becoming involved in Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP), an

Ethnic-Studies community-based organization in San Francisco, CA. It was intentional that I would pursue an Ethnic Studies degree at SFSU due to the legacy of the 1968 Black Student Union—Third World Liberation Front at SFSU, which was the longest and largest student strike in US history. Over 700 students protested and the school was shut down for five months. Students demanded a non-Eurocentric curriculum that represented the community around them. Ultimately, they wanted SFSU to provide what Tintiangco-Cubales (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2019) describe as the "ARC" of an Ethnic Studies pedagogy: Access to higher education, Relevant curriculum, and service to the Community. The result of the strike was the first College of Ethnic Studies in the nation. As a graduate student, my first meeting on campus was with Daniel Phil Gonzales, who was a 1968 student striker and a professor in Asian American Studies. He said, "One thing about our Asian American Studies program is that we don't need binoculars to see what is going on in our communities." His words affirmed I was in the right place as we both understood that Ethnic Studies was not simply a field of study focused on identity but one that deemed community collective organizing as essential.

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## Building Equitable Access

**AMONG THE GOALS OF AN ETHNIC** Studies pedagogy is self-determination for black, Indigenous, and communities of color often invisible to and within the academy. Self-determination, or the ability for dispossessed people to center one's experiences in shaping one's material reality, was an impetus for the formation of the AA&PI Student Services-Asian American and Pacific Islander Retention and Education (ASPIRE) Program. In 2016, I collaborated on the Department of Education Title III Asian American Native American and Pacific Islander (AANAPISI) proposal at San Francisco State University. As an alumnus of the AAS master's program and the Educational Leadership Doctorate Program at SFSU, it was full circle for me to participate in a project that took my experience as a student, instructor, and community organizer to help respond to the needs of our AA&PI student population. As significant was that our principal investigators (PI) of the grant was Dr. Grace Yoo, then chair of Asian American Studies, was also the founding Director of APSP at UCR. She assembled a team that included Dr. Laureen Chew, a striker in the 1968 Ethnic Studies movement and professor in Asian American Studies and our co-PI, former Vice President of Student Services and Enrollment Management (SAEM), Dr. Luoluo Hong. We created a collaboration that would build partnerships inside and outside of the campus, and institutionalize services for AA&PI students at the university.

The development of the AA&PI Student Services-ASPIRE Program centers student identities, narratives, and experiences that may have been invisible and/or sidelined in the traditional work of student services. In ASPIRE, advocating and creating opportunities for access and visibility is a priority for our students. When SFSU received AANAPISI funding in Fall 2016, two positions within Student Affairs and Enrollment Management were created and incrementally institutionalized at SFSU each year of the grant. I was hired as the first Interim Assistant Dean for Asian American & Pacific Islander Student Services under the Dean of Students in SAEM, with my position and the program later moving to a new Division of Equity and Community Inclusion and a change in my title to Director. The next hire was our ASPIRE Educational Psychologist in Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Dr. Gwen Agustin. Dr. Agustin provides support services and access to resources that are often underutilized by AA&PI students. Within this grant, Dr. Agustin partners with Disability Programs and Resource Center, faculty members, and staff to provide free screenings and learning disability testing on site. The creation of these two positions has allowed us to support the work already in place among the faculty in

Ethnic Studies. Oftentimes when services are not in place for students, Ethnic Studies faculty bear the responsibility as teachers, advisors, counselors, career services, social workers, and advocates for students. These two positions dedicated to service our AA&PI Students provide sustainable partnerships and access to services on and off campus.

## Relevant and Responsive Communities of Care

**AS THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR** of the AA&PI Student Services department at SFSU, my service to students is guided by an Ethnic Studies pedagogy that is relevant and responsive. Pedagogy is not just a method to engage students in learning in the classroom, but it is also a framework in which to build relationships with students. According to Tintiangco-Cubales (2010), the essence of pedagogy is the ability to see the student, the identity of "who is being taught, who is teaching, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to structure and power" (as cited in Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2010, p. viii). An Ethnic Studies pedagogy is about the work of teachers and student service administrators to be culturally and community responsive to their students so they could see themselves, their communities, and their histories and experiences in the classroom and curriculum. By responding to the needs of AA&PI students, we can address the history of systemic oppression our communities have faced. It is important to understand how history plays a role in the challenges our AA&PI students face as they navigate an institution that marginalizes them and overlooks their needs.

I employ an Ethnic Studies Pedagogy to develop responsive praxis with the ASPIRE Program. Praxis is the critical and cyclical process of theory, action, and reflection (Freire, 2000) and the intention of creating these services is to build and sustain a direct partnership with the College of Ethnic Studies and SAEM. The goal of ASPIRE is to improve and expand the capacity to serve AA&PI students and engage them in equitable learning environments as a practice toward freedom. ASPIRE's partnership with the College of Ethnic Studies builds a bridge with Student Affairs and Enrollment Management to address the silos of higher education through culturally relevant collaboration. This bridge provides wrap-around services for our students, support for our faculty members, peer mentorship support, and a community of care.

To ground myself within the ARC of Ethnic Studies and Ethnic Studies Pedagogy, I had to make sure my leadership as an administrator focused on my own critical practice as a leader and relationships with the communities I serve. The elimination of oppression within society and particularly in education consists of a collective struggle in reading the world and transforming it with others. Eliminating oppression also calls for what Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) name transformational role models and mentors to inspire students to be concerned with social justice issues.

> Transformational role models are visible members of one's own racial/ethnic and/or gender group who actively demonstrate a commitment to social justice, whereas transformational mentors use the aforementioned traits and their own experiences and expertise to help guide the development of others. Thus a mentor is involved in a more complex relationship than a role model in that she or he is someone who participates in one's socialization and development. (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 322)

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ASPIRE peer mentors and ASPIRE faculty embody transformational role models and mentors who inspire and socialize students to become concerned with and struggle for social justice issues that oppress them personally, within their schools, and in their communities. "Role models and mentors should also be committed to continuous process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Continuing the legacy of Ethnic Studies, self-determination and critical thinking are important for our community to experience the process of humanization in and out of the classroom. bell hooks (1994) expressed,

> They [students] do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and over their life experiences. (p. 19)

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones asked to share how their experiences are connected to reading the world. Transformational educators and leaders will also take the risk and connect themselves with the students to understand and change the world. This is our hope for ASPIRE: that we create a community that lends support for all involved in the process and our educational space becomes a home to critically reflect and take action to respond as a whole community.

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## In Praxis

**DESPITE THE HEGEMONY OF LEADERSHIP** that is at the foundation of schooling in the United States, I wanted to create a counter-space within this institution where students learned about their ethnic identity, how to critically question and analyze the root of problems, and find ways to be active participants in society for equity and social justice. Ethnic Studies is embedded in the praxis both in our classrooms and within the training of the teachers and critical leaders. Institutionalization of our AANAPISI ASPIRE program is grounded in critical collaboration and Ethnic Studies to provide services for AA&PI students after the grant cycle is complete. Writing this article has served as the reflection to my praxis as a leader in creating ASPIRE with students like Levalasi Loi-On—who is now our

full-time Student Success Coordinator for ASPIRE—faculty members who work tirelessly to engage our students in reaching their full potential, and colleagues who passionately fight for equitable practices. Reflection is often painful as I recollected what our community has created so far. I found that humanizing work could also feel dehumanizing, yet the dialogical relationship of pain and love leads to the growth of my community and myself. With this reflection, I want to emphasize that becoming a critical leader who bridges our communities to the university is a constant process that for me began as a young person becoming involved in culturally relevant college programming.

I am on a unique journey as an instructor for the College of Ethnic Studies and administrator in SAEM along with the many communities I ground my practice with. I constantly have to go back to where this work started for me when I was involved with APSP, a program that was started before AANAPISI funding and to ground my purpose in the work we do every day. As I approach this work as a critical leader, it is important for me to ground my praxis with connection, reflection, learning, and loving myself to create a unity between my position within an institution of higher education and the community I serve.

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### NOTES

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