

A Sense of Belonging

Newly launched Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies program a welcome addition to campus

UC San Diego will have a new program in Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies starting in fall, a long-awaited move that many students, faculty, staff and alumni have been eager to see.

Offering cultural programming and the university's very first minor in Asian American and Pacific Islander studies, the new program is housed in the Institute of Arts and Humanities, along with 14 additional programs, including African American Studies and Chicanx and Latinx Studies.

Division of Arts and Humanities Dean Cristina Della Coletta said pursuing interdisciplinary studies through critical dialogue can help combat racism and foster a better understanding of unique people and places in the world, a sentiment felt by institute director Nancy Kwak.

"Interdisciplinary studies can help us think critically about larger questions of identity, place-making and social justice. This program isn't just for Asian American and Pacific Islander students; it can help all of us make better sense of the world we inhabit," said Kwak, an associate professor in the Department of History. The [Institute of Arts and Humanities](#) is administered by the Division of Arts and Humanities.

History associate professor Simeon Man will lead the program as faculty director. Also associate director of the institute, Man said UC San Diego is one of the last University of California campuses to establish a program of this type.

"The establishment of the Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies Program at UC San Diego is long overdue, and now couldn't be timelier," he said. "With the catastrophes of the global pandemic, climate change, racism and the violence of policing, it has become necessary to build spaces of



Kaibigang Pilipin@, a Pilipino/a-centered student organization, holds an annual Kumustahan Orientasyon program. Photo courtesy of APIMEDA Programs and Services.

collective study wherever possible, to understand how we got here and to build toward a different future. I'm hopeful that the program can be one more space to build community and to do this work."



Students attending the APIA Heritage Celebration Lunch in May 2019. Photo courtesy of APIMEDA Programs and Services.

The new program will emphasize the interdisciplinary study of history and culture of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, allowing students to examine the art, literature, history and political struggles of peoples originating from East, Central, South and Southeast Asia, and the islands in the Pacific Ocean.

The program emphasizes these groups not as discrete regional or ethnic identities, Man said, but rather as positions both formed and negotiated in relation to United States colonialism.

"Asians and Pacific Islanders are here, in the United States, because the United States was there," he said. "We cannot fully understand their histories and experiences without acknowledging that fact and that colonialism persists."

A history of advocacy

Efforts to establish the program and minor are longstanding, and have historically been student-driven. In 1987, the Asian Pacific Islander Student Alliance formed a committee to advocate for recognition and, in 2011, the Coalition for Critical Asian American Studies was formed. In 2014, the coalition addressed the need for increased institutional support, including mental health services, faculty hires with research dedicated specifically to the discipline and the expansion of relevant courses.

Department of Ethnic Studies Distinguished Professor YẾN Lê Espiritu said hiring faculty with research and experience focused on these studies was very important, acknowledging the great strides students took to document failed faculty-retention efforts, as well as discrimination toward Asian American students.

"The minor is only one small step toward what the students originally wanted," she said. "I would want this to next include faculty recruitment and retention, to really see the program grow."

Alumni Windi Sasaki '00 has much investment in the establishment of the program, both as alumni and current staff. In 2016, Sasaki became the first program manager of the newly established Asian Pacific Islander Middle Eastern Desi American (APIMEDA) Programs and Services, a Campus Community Center within the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.



The Coalition for Critical Asian American Studies was formed in 2011 and meets regularly. Photo courtesy of APIMEDA Programs and Services.

“Establishing the program is significant for what it means for student persistence, for advocacy, for confidence and for visibility,” she said. “I know this will aid in student retention, and in their sense of belonging, as students will see themselves in their course material, and so in academia.”

Working directly with Sasaki at APIMEDA Programs and Services is Annie Chin, a double major in History and Ethnic Studies. Chin said they were propelled to social activism in high

school and, during an African American history class their first year, they came to realize the importance of learning about their extended family’s experiences. Chin, who is a coalition lead, said taking classes that are now affiliated with the new minor is empowering, and lessens the distance many feel from their families.

“We want to learn about our communities and ways that we can support them, and make their lives better,” Chin said. “I really hope this program—for all students—is an exposure, and allows them to humanize and know those who are marginalized in history.”

Student and alumni impact

Two additional students happy to see the establishment of the program are Victoria Pham, a Literature and History double major who co-leads the student organization Asians and Pacific Islanders for the Arts and Humanities, and Faustina Ngo, a Public Health and Ethnic Studies double major who is a SIPHR retention co-director at the student-run resource center, SPACES.

Pham said the program is an important step to empowering current and future students. A large impact, she said, was that students would be more aware of classes that center their own community history, a benefit she encountered when she first started at the university.

“Taking Asian American-centered courses as an Asian American in college has had a profound impact for me, as I feel inspired listening to activists that have come before me,” she said. “The more I learn, the more I want to understand myself by thinking critically of issues surrounding my identity.”



The new minor consists of seven courses over multiple disciplines. Photo courtesy of Institute of Arts and Humanities.

Ngo had similar thoughts on the importance of representation in curriculum, and encouraged continuing to advocate for the distinct ethnicities that are collected under the umbrella term “Asian and Pacific Islander.”

“It’s great that we get to learn our own histories, because we are not really afforded that before coming to college,” Ngo said. “If we don’t learn our own history, we are at risk of perpetuating the systemic problems that plague our communities, and it’s also important for us to know our duty in relation to our Black and Brown brothers and sisters.”

Heightened visibility for these types of classes were few for alumni Kent Lee '07, who graduated with degrees in Economics and Biology. Now the executive director of Pacific Arts Movement, Lee is a member of the UC San Diego [Asian Pacific Islander Alumni Council](#), with the mission of positively uniting and promoting Asian and Pacific Islander communities through professional and personal support, engagement, representation and mentorship.

Join the Asian Pacific Islander Alumni Council for a virtual discussion on the
Launch of AAPI Studies Minor and the Future of the API Experience at UC San Diego
THURS 9/17/2020
5:30-6:30 PDT

 Irving Ling '14 Resident Physician, UCSF	 Windi Sasaki '00 APIMEDA Program Manager	 Annie Chin '21 History Major Community Organizer
 Samuel Tsoi Assistant Director 21st Century China Ctr	 Simeon Man Associate Professor History	 Kent Lee '07 Moderator Pacific Arts Movement

Register for [Sept. 17 UC San Diego Alumni webinar](#), moderated by Kent Lee '07.

“We’re in a day and an age, especially amidst COVID-19, where the heightened perceptions of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities are continuously shaped and impacted. As a whole, increased awareness around these identities and their histories helps to foster understanding in a positive way,” Lee said. The council will host a panel discussion marking the launch of the new program and minor on Sept. 17.

Academic opportunity is at the core of the program for Kwak and Man, who encourage all students to explore adding a minor to their time at UC San Diego. The [Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies](#) minor consists of seven courses, or 28 units from areas ranging from Anthropology to Visual Arts. Those interested are encouraged to set up an appointment with program staff

via the Virtual Advising Center, or VAC.

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