

Many students say colleges are too slow to add Asian-American studies

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Many college students are pushing for Asian-American studies. Notable figures from Asian-American history include actor, author and activist George Takei (left), figure skater Michelle Kwan (top center), actress Constance Wu (top right) and Senator Daniel Inouye (bottom right). Photos: Wikimedia/Public Domain

At a cafe near Williams College in western Massachusetts, students crammed for final exams. Tyler Tsay, a junior American studies major, had something else on his mind as well.

"It's very necessary to have an Asian-American studies program, if only to complete the American Studies program that already exists on campus," Tsay said.

The 21-year-old is from Pasadena, California, and is the son of Taiwanese and Korean immigrants. He leads a group called Asian-American Students in Action, which is demanding that Williams recognize an Asian-American studies major within the next five years. In April, to make its case, his group disrupted a student orientation. "We wanted to make it clear that this movement is something that shouldn't be ignored anymore," Tsay explained.

UMass Boston Is Taking The Lead

Tsay's campaign is also being replicated on other campuses. Students at Temple, Amherst, Duke and Yale are demanding Asian-American studies programs. Next fall, Princeton will launch one. The push has been off and on for decades, but today there are only about 30 programs. Most are located at public universities on the West Coast.

"The Asian-American population is still heavily concentrated in the West Coast, particularly California," Paul Watanabe said. He is a Japanese-American political scientist at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. UMass Boston is the only college in the state to offer a major in Asian-American studies.

Watanabe's parents were put in World War II-era Japanese-American concentration camps. The prison camps were a result of anti-Japanese feelings during the war. He said that traditional and elite colleges such as Williams and Harvard should reconsider the value of Asian-American studies.

Immigration History Is U.S. History

Watanabe points to moments in U.S. history that demonstrate the importance of Asian-American studies. Take the Chinese Exclusion Act as an example, he said. In that act, Chinese laborers were banned from coming to the United States for 10 years. Such a law is a path to understanding the immigration history of the United States, he said. "You can't talk about issues like World War II or even the current so-called war on terror without talking about the links between the World War II incarceration of Japanese-Americans."

Some scholars also said this goes beyond Asian-American studies. It's also about advancing other programs, too, including African-American and Latino academic programs.

"This to me is part of being a good citizen," said Sumun Pendakur, who is with the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California. "Are we educated about power, privilege, opportunity, access? Whose stories do we know and whose stories do we not know?"

Ethnic Studies Questioned

Pendakur worries that race and ethnic studies are under threat. She points to Arizona where lawmakers recently tried, and ultimately failed, to ban ethnic studies in a state where Latino and Chicano studies have a presence.

Chicano is a term that some Mexican-Americans use to describe their identity, whereas Latino refers to Americans with roots across Latin America. These are the countries south of the United States that were colonized by Spain and Portugal.

"That was an overt power play by the legislature," Pendakur said. "They said they did not want a community to be empowered, and at the same time they did not want other people to learn about the Chicano experience."

At Williams, Asians and Asian-Americans make up about 17 percent of the student body. Nonetheless, Tsay said that he can often feel socially and academically marginalized. Part of that is because the Williams faculty is just 10 percent Asian or Asian-American. That's why his group also wants the college to hire more professors who specialize in Asian-American studies.

Tsay sees these hires as an opportunity for the university to show it values the Asian-American experience. As a result, he says, the rest of the community could take it as a cue.

Many Colleges Do Not Want To Commit

Williams administrators said they understand the argument that Tsay and other students are making. The campus already offers black and Latino programs, but they will not commit to creating an Asian-American studies program. Dean of Faculty Lee Park said creating a new program is complicated. There are many areas of interest to develop, he said, but resources are limited as far as hiring capabilities. Additionally, federal law limits how the college can pursue a more diverse faculty. "We can't carry out race-based hiring for any group," Park said.

Student activists, though, feel administrators have ignored them for too long.

"Being a person of color at Williams is an experience that isn't really paid a lot of attention," said 19-year-old sophomore Rheia Jiang. She is from San Diego and is of Chinese heritage. She says an Asian-American studies program at Williams would deepen her understanding of this part of U.S. history.

This summer, Jiang and other student activists will take action. They plan to encourage wealthy alumni to stop their donations until Williams commits to such a program.

Quiz

- 1 The selection below from the section "Ethnic Studies Questioned" helps support the claim that Williams does not do enough to value diversity and make all students feel welcome.

Nonetheless, Tsay said that he can often feel socially and academically marginalized. Part of that is because the Williams faculty is just 10 percent Asian or Asian-American.

Which sentence from the article BEST provides further support for this claim?

- (A) That's why his group also wants the college to hire more professors who specialize in Asian-American studies.
- (B) Williams administrators said they understand the argument that Tsay and other students are making.
- (C) "Being a person of color at Williams is an experience that isn't really paid a lot of attention," said 19-year-old sophomore Rheia Jiang.
- (D) She says an Asian-American studies program at Williams would deepen her understanding of this part of U.S. history.

- 2 Read the list of sentences from the article.

1. *Students at Temple, Amherst, Duke and Yale are demanding Asian-American studies programs.*
2. *The push has been off and on for decades, but today there are only about 30 programs.*
3. *He said that traditional and elite colleges such as Williams and Harvard should reconsider the value of Asian-American studies.*
4. *She points to Arizona where lawmakers recently tried, and ultimately failed, to ban ethnic studies in a state where Latino and Chicano studies have a presence.*

Which two sentences, taken together, provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that proposals for culturally diverse programs have often been met with resistance?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

- 3 Why does Paul Watanabe support the idea of more colleges offering Asian-American studies?

- (A) because he teaches Asian-American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and is eager to have more students attend his classes
- (B) because he observes that many of his students feel marginalized, and believes that Asian-American studies can help prevent that from happening
- (C) because he believes that participating in diverse programs, such as Asian-American studies, is one of the first steps in becoming a good citizen
- (D) because he recognizes the importance of understanding the relationship between Asian-American studies and U.S. history

Which option accurately characterizes Williams administrators' response to Tyler Tsay's request for an Asian-American studies program?

- (A) Although the administrators have acknowledged Tsay's argument, they are unwilling to commit to creating the program due to limited resources.
- (B) Although the administrators have demonstrated interest in Tsay's proposal, they have been unable to hire enough professors to teach the courses.
- (C) While the administrators have indicated that they would like to follow Tsay's suggestions, they have pointed to federal laws that mandate the courses they must offer.
- (D) While the administrators have allowed Tsay to continue protesting, they have declined to comment on whether their administration will pursue the idea.