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Strategies for Very Small Asian Studies Programs

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This panel was conceived during a session of the 2000 ASIANetwork Conference, when Sharon Wesoky and I were listening to a great presentation by Tim Cheek about teaching Asian Studies at Colorado College. I whispered to Sharon that she and I lived in a very different world from the one Tim came from—at our colleges, there are only one or two Asianists, very limited resources in general and particularly for Asian Studies, few students who bring natural curiosity about Asia to college with them (largely because our students are from European backgrounds and have little multicultural experience), and faculty and administrators often are indifferent, even hostile, to Asian Studies. I thought we should have a panel directly aimed at such schools, since probably the majority of member schools in ASIANetwork are similar in many ways. The Program Committee fortunately was receptive, so I invited Ronnie Littlejohn to join Sharon and me in presenting this panel.

My presentation was quite informal at the Conference, and I'll try to maintain that tone while providing this written summary. I was tempted to tell everyone to first, get a grant and second, get a high-level administrator on your side, and then sit down. Certainly if you have those two

things, everything else is likely to be solvable, but I also figured that such advice was not too helpful since everyone already knew it. But a little more seriously, I would like to discuss these two issues briefly. Grants are key to Asian Studies, not least because Asian Studies will probably require an expensive language program, library development, faculty development, and possibly support for student travel abroad. Grants can come from places you don't expect, or more easily than you expect. Exploit the personal connections your college may have with potential donors who are themselves interested in Asia. Those donors may be willing to provide a seed money grant of a few thousand dollars just because you ask for it for the purpose of developing Asian Studies. At small colleges like ours, a few thousand can go a long way in preparing you to go after the bigger and more formal grants you will need later.

The other issue which is key for small, often new, Asian Studies programs is to get allies on campus. As we all know, many people on campus will see the growth of Asian Studies as coming at the expense of something else. Often this is a realistic concern, and cannot be fully alleviated. But it can be mitigated by working hard to include all faculty and administrators with any interest in Asia. One way we did this at Saint Anselm College, where I teach, was to offer a faculty development workshop—open to the first 15 faculty who expressed interest regardless of teaching field—on India. The workshop was fully subscribed less than a day after notice was sent to the faculty by e-mail. Perhaps few of these 15 people will incorporate substantial sections on India in their courses (since we had two French professors and one biology professor among the group), but at the least all are now more likely to be active supporters of Asian Studies.

The heart of my presentation addresses three issues: what does Asian Studies look like at Saint Anselm College? This section explores the decisions and compromises made in implementing our new and tiny Asian Studies program. Second, is language instruction necessary? This proved to be the most vexing issue for people attending the panel. Third, how can we integrate Asian Studies into the highly Eurocentric curriculum when for many at the school, the Eurocentric curriculum is at the heart of the College's identity? I realize that fewer and fewer schools face this particular dilemma, but for those who do, it is a wrenching issue.

At Saint Anselm College, we have a certificate program (like a minor) in Asian Studies. Students in the certificate take five courses with Asian Studies content, of which no more than two can be from the same department. This program was approved to begin in the 2000-2001 school year, but three 2001 graduates had completed the requirements and received certificates. I believe this indicates a reasonably high level of student enthusiasm. Not all the courses have solely Asian content. The criteria for including a course are (as yet) informal, but roughly the content needs to be one-third Asian, which means that many comparative courses (Comparative Constitutional Law, for example) are included. I am not completely satisfied with how this part of our certifi-

cate works, but think a faculty development approach is the best way to address the issue of Asian content. If we provide the faculty with opportunities to develop Asian Studies expertise in their own disciplines, I think we will improve our course offerings. We do not teach any Asian languages yet at Saint Anselm, and actually that was the most controversial aspect of getting the certificate approved. Part of the College's Benedictine tradition emphasizes that learning about another culture means learning the language.

This brings me to my second major issue: Asian language instruction. I'm in an awkward position on this one, since I myself do not speak an Asian language. My primary field is US history, and I work on US-Southeast Asian relations in the colonial period. Learning French and Dutch as research languages was sufficient for my fieldwork. My own experiences lead me to believe that it is possible to study Asia at some level and for some types of questions without knowing an Asian language, so I feel confident that I am doing my students a bigger service by introducing them to Asia (with or without Asian language instruction for any of us) than if there were no Asian Studies at my college. That said, not studying any Asian language has many drawbacks. It does tend to exacerbate the already-strong tendencies in my students to exoticize Asia. The lack of Asian language instruction also makes it much more difficult for students who have become excited about Asia to move immediately into working in Asia or going to graduate school. One of my students who graduated this year with an Asian Studies certificate and who had taken every Asian history course I offered came very close to going to China to teach, but backed out in the end. I think if she had had some language instruction, she would have felt more confident about taking this challenge. At our college, the reason for hesitating to offer an Asian language is primarily financial. We are working on ways to address this issue, and during the session, the audience and other panelists suggested that new CD-ROM courses seem to offer decent instruction.

Finally, Saint Anselm College is unusual in still having a time-consuming and relatively set core curriculum which reflects its traditional European and Catholic identity. Approximately half the courses our students take are part of the core curriculum, and those courses include three semesters each of philosophy and theology, as well as four semesters of a humanities course (Portraits of Human Greatness) which is taught by the humanities faculty as a whole and therefore naturally reflects the primarily European-centered interests of most of the faculty. On the one hand, this situation is obviously a challenging one for Asian Studies faculty, because students have little room left in their schedule to try out a new or different course just for fun. On the other hand, we have worked to get Asian Studies courses accepted into the core. For instance, there is an Asian Religions course, and this semester one on Tibetan Buddhism in theology; in philosophy we have a course on Confucian Thinkers. These courses are always full to overflowing precisely because students are seeking ways to take something different as they fulfill their requirements. But the nature of our curriculum,

which is unlikely to change substantially in the near future, means that it is even more necessary to build alliances with other faculty, so that students have as much exposure to content about Asia as possible. For me, that has meant always being willing and able to draw connections between European and Asian epistemologies. In a discussion with the dean of the college about which Asian language we might offer if we decided to offer one, I suggested that there were ways in which Chinese and Latin had served similar functions for, respectively, (Eastern) Asia and (Western) Europe. Since the dean is a Benedictine monk and theologian, this comparison resonated and gave him a way of articulating the intellectual as well as practical benefits of teaching Chinese.

Based on the discussion which followed the three informal presentations, I think that many members of ASIANetwork are struggling with similar issues, especially how to get resources, build alliances, offer a rich Asian Studies program with few or perhaps no Asia specialists, and the ever-vexing question of language instruction. Those who attended the session were without exception thoughtful, even innovative, in their approaches to these issues, and I hope that future ASIANetwork sessions will continue to provide structured opportunities for people from these very small schools to share strategies with each other.

Producing Asian Studies: A User's Manual

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How do we create programs in Asian Studies where resources and interest also need to be created? How do we move beyond Eurocentric (or, more likely, "Americentric") patterns among our students and colleagues? Allegheny College is currently in the process of exploring answers to these questions, and the "ending" to the story is far from clear. Here, however, is the story so far. I will first address some of the contexts for Asian Studies at Allegheny, both in terms of institutional and curricular resources and obstacles. I will then look at how "Asian Studies" is being established in this context.

Institutionally, Allegheny has some disadvantages regarding the likely success of establishing Asian Studies. It is located in a relatively isolated locale in one of the poorest counties in Pennsylvania. Its student body of about 1900 students is primarily white, and, although students are drawn from many states and several foreign countries, the majority