

## Asian American Studies Proposal

As recognized in “Towards Wesleyan’s Bicentennial”, the pandemic has laid bare the reality of racialized violence in this country through the Black Lives Matter movement. The pandemic also saw an increase in anti-Asian violence where incidents of anti-Asian violence increased by 339% in 2021 compared to 2020.<sup>1</sup> The spike in anti-Asian violence during the pandemic is connected to a long history of white supremacist violence against people of color and Asians. Asian Americans have also long been racialized as the “model minority,” defining Asian Americans as a self-reliant and assimilated group in contrast to other communities of color. This is a myth and dynamic which we wholly reject and rebuke.

The Asian American Studies Working Group sees Asian American Studies (AAS) as central to our liberal arts education. We admire Wesleyan’s commitment to “increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion” as the institution reflects on the pandemic’s clarification of racialized and classed violence. We agree that higher education can “reinforce privilege and division” and will make the case that AAS is crucial to making the university a “vehicle for social mobility and cohesion.” In this proposal, we will define Asian American Studies, discuss its relevance at Wesleyan, and offer some potential avenues for its implementation.

**What is Asian American Studies?** AAS explores the historical and current presence of the growing and heterogeneous diasporas of Asians in America. The interdisciplinary field aims to understand both how people from Asia (including East, Southeast, South, West, and Central Asia, as well as the Middle East) have been racialized in the context of the United States, as well as how Asian Americans have constructed numerous and dynamic identities and stories. The field further examines the experience of Asians in the US, and how a unique history of marginalization and exclusion informs Asian American experiences and larger structures of oppression. Understanding the social and historical presence of Asians in America is crucial to studying racial formation, immigration, citizenship, and nationality in the United States.

**Asian American Studies at Wesleyan:** Since the 1980s, Wesleyan students have advocated for an AAS program through asking the administration to fund classes and research, organizing for faculty positions, and teaching their own student forums. AAS is currently a course cluster at Wesleyan, meaning that faculty members who teach relevant courses can agree to list their classes on a dedicated WesMaps page. The cluster allows students to view these classes, but it does not ensure that they will continue to be offered in future years, nor does it guarantee faculty retention or future hires in the field.

Furthermore, courses listed on the AAS cluster fall under only five departments—the College of East Asian Studies, American Studies, English, History, and Religion—and concentrate largely in the study of literature, which cannot alone provide a robust education in AAS. This reflects a significant dearth in course offerings, given that AAS also spans the disciplines of sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, ethnomusicology, psychology, and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies. Additionally, the College of East Asian Studies emerges from a distinct academic tradition that does not provide a comprehensive study of the Asian diaspora or Asian Americans. Considering the liberal arts stance of Wesleyan, a comprehensive examination of Asian American identity is critical.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yam, Kimmy. “Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Increased 339 Percent Nationwide Last Year, Report Says.” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 Feb. 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-339-percent-nationwide-last-year-repo-rcna14282>.

Thus, seeking more comprehensive course offerings and vibrant intellectual community in AAS, we propose the formal establishment of AAS at Wesleyan.

We believe that AAS fulfills these goals of the strategic plan in the following ways:

**1. Enhance our distinctive educational program, capitalizing on academic strengths;**

- **Strengthens the connections between liberal and lifelong learning.** Learning the history of Asian Americans elucidates and helps students situate themselves within the broader history of the United States, propelling further action and civic engagement. AAS also strengthens all students' understandings of systems of oppression, as the racialization of Asians is crucial to defining US citizenship and borders, and relatedly, white supremacy and imperialism.
- **Further diversity, equity, and inclusion.** The addition of AAS fulfills a key tenet which is currently missing in Wesleyan's curriculum on Race & Ethnic Studies, thereby promoting the university's intellectual diversity. It also creates an intellectual environment which is welcoming towards the disciplines of faculty and staff from underrepresented groups.
- **Stimulate research, pedagogical innovation, and effectiveness.** More AAS course offerings in history, sociology, and other disciplines will spark and inform student interest in independent research, increasing the number of independent projects in the social sciences.
- **Energize distinctive residential and co-curricular learning.** AAS introduces anti-racist pedagogy, which supports the residential learning goals that promote community and diversity as well as the alleviation of microaggressions.

**2. Builds on our reputation as a leader in pragmatic liberal education;**

**Highlight what makes Wesleyan distinctive:** As a dynamic and growing field, AAS is home to deeply innovative and critical scholarship. Its creation will attract further talented students and faculty to Wesleyan who are invested in having a "powerful impact on the world." By bolstering Wesleyan's liberal arts reputation, AAS will prove to yield a wide array of advantageous benefits, including new opportunities for cultural, artistic, and service based engagement.

**Peer Institutions:** The establishment of AAS would allow Wesleyan to remain a competitive, intellectually challenging, and supportive institution among its peers. Out of 27 peer institutions listed by the Chronicle of Higher Education, 8 have established some form of AAS as a minor, program, or department.

We are particularly interested in highlighting our fellow members of the "Little Three" over the past five years. In 2019, the Williams Committee on Appointments and Promotions approved two tenure-track Asian Americanist hires in the American Studies and Religion Departments in response to student interest; furthermore, faculty approved an AAS Program proposal earlier this month. In 2018, Amherst publicly committed to the establishment of AAS and currently hosts an AAS Initiatives Fund to support students, staff, alumni, and faculty pursuing research related to the experiences of Asian Americans. In May 2022, Amherst's Committee on Educational Policy approved the hiring of three tenure-track professors with backgrounds and expertise in AAS, who will arrive in the 2023-2024 school

year. Moreover, peers in the NESCAC including Tufts University boasts a robust Asian American Studies minor under their Race, Colonialism, and Diaspora department.

**Student Interest and Impact:** AAS functions as a critical site for Asian American Wesleyan students to develop greater consciousness of themselves and their history, which they can carry forward in their lives after Wesleyan. In a student survey we released earlier this month, respondents described the transformative and “eye-opening” impact of AAS courses. One student wrote, “These courses made me understand my lived reality and shape the way I interact with myself and others.” Another shared that Professor Oberiano’s “Asians and Pacific Islanders in US Empire” course “provided me with the tools to think more critically about what it means to be and exist in an Asian American body... I feel more empowered in my diasporic identity and am motivated to approach my studies with a more critical and intersectional lens.” These perspectives highlight ways in which AAS prepares students to successfully launch into and out of Wesleyan as critical thinkers and leaders in civic engagement. The creation of an AAS program will lead to additional and more intersectional courses which engage with Asian American history. Furthermore, survey responses reveal an overwhelming desire for greater course offerings and institutional support for AAS. As of December 21, 288 students (98.3% of respondents) agreed that if more courses in AAS were offered they would be interested in taking them. 187 students said they would consider declaring a major in AAS, and 239 said they would consider a minor. Over two thirds of respondents agreed that the presence of an AAS major or minor would have positively impacted their decision to apply to Wesleyan, and 247 students (86.7%) said that AAS would help them launch into the world as a stronger citizen and scholar.

**Next Steps:** In dialogue with faculty members, administrators, students, alumni, and peer institutions, we have identified several initiatives as fundamental steps in the establishment of Asian American Studies at Wesleyan. Because AAS is entwined in the fields of study of other marginalized groups that are also underrepresented in the University, we write about the possibility of AAS housed within larger ethnic studies programs at Wesleyan. While recognizing that significant further work with faculty and administration is necessary to determine the precise contours of such curricula, we propose the following initiatives:

- AAS fund to support faculty recruitment, student and faculty research and initiatives, and the long term implementation of an AAS Program
- AAS Minor
- AAS Major
- Provision of course release for faculty leading the creation of new academic programs
- Establishment of a Center or College for Race and Ethnic Studies (including Arab American Studies, Indigenous Studies, Latinx American Studies, and more)
- Comprehensive course offerings in AAS, specifically including courses on Arab American Studies, additional history courses and sociology courses which examine the lived experiences and racialization of Asian Americans
- The hiring of more tenure-track AAS faculty, particularly within the History, Sociology, Science in Society, and Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Programs