

Life Lessons from Assi Workers

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The initial goals and historical mission of Asian American Studies were to link students with the community. The students at San Francisco State who initiated the first Asian American Studies program recognized the need for exchange and dialogue in order to experience a full education. Their precedent and example serve as an inspiration for Asian American students to continue their work with the community.

While the community may benefit from services that the students provide, ultimately, students gain the most from working and learning with the community. Since the benefits that a student would gain from such an experience are too many to name, we will focus on the need for the student to gain “life experience” education, rather than traditional “academic” education. Too much focus and value has been placed on traditional curriculum, education, and getting a degree. Higher education has been faulted for preaching from the “ivory towers” of academia, distancing itself from the community.

On the other hand, a “life experience” education focus would draw the student and his/her community closer. For example, our campaign with the Assi workers allows us to have hands-on experience with a current Asian American social movement. Therefore, we can immediately incorporate reading materials from class and draw connections with actual workers’ stories. Rather than just reading about theories and examples in textbooks, students can become active agents of change in the community.

By actively participating in the lives of workers and immigrants, students learn the importance of creating and affecting history. Furthermore, students often read about social movements after they have happened. Working with the Assi campaign will give students a chance to learn directly about the actual process of a workers' rights campaign, including the successes and failures that come with it.

Aside from learning the content of their life stories, students can view workers' organizing efforts and lives as models for student activism, leadership and empowerment. Students and workers can work side by side for a common goal. The Assi workers have a huge potential to teach students the real-life struggles of immigrants, the fight for human rights and ultimately the reason that Asian American Studies exists in the first place.

Much can be learned from the Assi workers' interethnic alliances. Because of the diverse population among Assi workers, the likelihood of conflict is great. However, the workers have been able to unite under a single cause; rather than fighting amongst themselves, they have joined to overcome a larger phenomenon of corporate exploitation. The workers are not consumed by petty cultural differences. They understand the need to cast aside differences in order to create actual change. Students can use some of their methods to build their own interethnic alliances on campus. Moreover, the workers' example teaches the student to look beyond one's own agenda and to listen to others' stories first, and then see how others' stories relate to their own. By first listening rather than leading, students are able to dispel preconceived notions, thereby legitimizing someone's story and thus acknowledging their "full humanity."

Parallels can be drawn between students' struggles and workers' struggles. The workers' persistence and belief to affect change is a lesson for the student to continue

fighting for their causes no matter what barriers they may face, such as advocating for Asian American Studies or Ethnic Studies on their own campuses. However, the workers' struggle also puts the bigger picture into focus for the students. Asian American struggles stretch beyond the campus. In other words, after a student has graduated, he/she needs to continue to stand up to oppressive bureaucracies.

Participating in the Assi campaign either introduces a student to issues in the Asian American community, or for the student who has already been introduced, this campaign allows them to have a deeper connection with Asian American struggles. Thus, working for an actual cause such as the Assi campaign gives students more reasons to fight continually and passionately for their communities' rights.

Students from universities or colleges often think that they can be Superwoman or Superman and "save" a community from oppression. However, students can and must humbly learn from workers that being a leader does not necessarily mean leading their picket lines or telling them what direction to follow. Rather, perhaps being a leader is standing in the back, or with the crowd, allowing the workers to determine their own destinies. Thus, students can serve a meaningful role, supporting the existing structure, offering suggestions and listening to the workers' stories.

College students often discover that their personal stories do not exist in isolation; rather, many in their own community often share their stories. Their personal story becomes incorporated with a larger history. Therefore, students are always linked to the communities from which they come. The opportunity to participate in the Assi campaign allows students to actively contribute to that shared history.