

CALMING THE CULTURAL CACOPHONY



ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM HELPS STUDENTS SUCCEED IN GLOBAL VILLAGE



For a soldier seeking the trust of civilians in Kabul, a salesperson courting a client in Bangalore or diplomats forging an agreement over dinner in Seoul, greater understanding yields greater success.

America's prosperity and security increasingly depend on how well we can communicate with people of other nations. With that in mind, in January 2006, President Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative, a plan to dramatically increase the number of U.S. citizens who speak languages considered critical, such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Farsi and Hindi. The initiative will support language instruction in kindergarten through the university level and fund programs to train foreign language teachers.

Perhaps even more than gaining foreign language skills, understanding other cultures is crucial for success in an ever-more-interconnected world. "The size of your vocabulary or the correctness of your grammar is trumped by your ability to deal with someone as a sympathetic cultural interactor," said H. Stephen Straight, vice provost for undergraduate education and international affairs at Binghamton University.

Binghamton's Asian and Asian American Studies (AAAS) program is poised to take a leading role in the movement

for greater intercultural understanding. Historically an undergraduate program, AAAS recently added an institute of advanced studies. The new Institute for Asian and Asian American Studies could open opportunities to increase the undergraduate offerings within AAAS, perhaps add a graduate program and support interdisciplinary faculty research.

For example, “there are some faculty who are looking to put together a mini-conference next year on issues of gender studies in South Asia,” said John Chaffee, professor of history and director of AAAS. Researchers with expertise in diverse areas might also collaborate on such subjects as migrations and the Asian diaspora, art history and Chinese and Japanese film, he said.

AAAS evolved from Binghamton University’s East Asian Studies program, which for many years focused mainly on China and Japan. Responding to strong student demand in the early 1990s, the program added an Asian American Studies component. This was considered

a temporary measure until the University gained the resources to develop a freestanding Asian American Studies program. But toward the end of the decade, “we decided that this marriage of convenience could be turned into a strength,” Chaffee said.

Few other universities have put the two fields of study under one roof, but the combination reflects current reality for Asians in the U.S. and in Asia, Chaffee said. “Those Asians who come to this country certainly become Americans, but in many cases they maintain their ties to Asia. In some cases, they go back and forth frequently. We find all kinds of very interesting social patterns in terms of how they negotiate the two cultures.” At the same time, “Asia itself is becoming increasingly globalized. The idea that you can compartmentalize Asia geographically, and say all we’re concerned with is studying Asia in the Asian context, no longer makes so much sense.”

Seokyoung Han, a doctoral candidate in philosophy, interpretation, and culture who earned a graduate certificate in

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AAAS, has come to appreciate the global nature of cultural diffusion. In her dissertation, she is examining didactic texts and illustrations created in Korea, China and Japan in the 15th through 17th centuries to learn how ideas are transmitted among cultures. To fulfill the Asian American Studies requirement for AAAS, she studied how Asian literature and American literature influence one another. While she chose that topic purely because it piqued her interest, eventually, "I recognized the fact that this is part of my [PhD] study, too," she said. "There is some kind of common denominator" among the mechanisms of cultural transmission.

In 2006, Han and two other graduate students created their own milieu for intercultural exchange, organizing an off-campus exhibit of work by contemporary artists from China, Korea and Japan.

A \$1.75 million grant from the Freeman Foundation has helped AAAS greatly expand its program since 2002. Today, it offers an undergraduate major and minor, a graduate certificate and a community internship program in New York City. Participating faculty come from the departments of German, Russian and East Asian Languages; History; Art History; Sociology; English; Philosophy; Anthropology; Economics; Management and Human Development.

The Institute for Asian and Asian American Studies has plans for even further expansion, including numerous community development and outreach activities. AAAS is also collaborating with the Department of Public Administration to develop a joint five-year

BA/MA program and to incorporate the graduate certificate in Asian and Asian American Studies into the master's in public administration.

The National Security Language Initiative could also hold promise for increasing Binghamton's offerings in Asian language and culture. "We've been eyeing that program, especially with our desire to expand in South Asian languages," Chaffee said. He hopes that the federal initiative might someday offer resources in that area, and also help satisfy the huge demand for more classes in Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

Courses in Asian languages are taught in the University's Department of German, Russian and East Asian Languages but AAAS maintains a close relationship with that department.

Because AAAS already offers so many courses that promote the understanding of Asian and Asian American culture, Binghamton University now can focus on exactly what the National Security Language Initiative calls for: expanding instruction in critical languages, said Straight. "But we'll be putting that in a context, thanks to John, that has a much greater chance of success than if we simply had the strength in languages." A student who learned Hindi at Binghamton, for example, could also explore how people who grew up speaking that language interact with other people and cultures, within India and around the world.

"What we're already doing," Straight said, "can set the stage for success in these other areas." ■



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