

CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

Actualizing the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI): Practical Considerations to Cultivate Program Director Success

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Executive Summary

Research on Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) has established that these institutions have an impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student success (National Commission on AAPI Research in Education [CARE], 2014; Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2018). While this is an important area of research, there is a need to turn attention to the future of this ten-year-old designation and consider how to sustain the program's success. Given the lack of clarity offered by the current administration related to changes to the educational budget, it is even more critical to conduct research on how AANAPISI programs can be sustained on college campuses across the nation. These insights can be best garnered from the individuals who are charged with the execution of these programs—program directors.

This brief highlights the insights and advisements of two program directors from two different AANAPISIs—one two-year and one four-year. Based on their own lessons learned, they offer practical considerations for other current and future program directors as they 1) prepare for the AANAPISI program (e.g. before the AANAPISI grant timeline starts); 2) execute the AANAPISI program (e.g. during the grant timeline); and 3) sustain the AANAPISI program (after the grant timeline). Recognizing that all AANAPISIs are different, the program directors' suggestions are offered as guidance, not prescription. They focus on the skills and characteristics that can be universally applied to all types of

colleges and universities, as program directors navigate the oftentimes challenging and unexpected hurdles that emerge in managing programs and working in institutions. The brief concludes with recommendations for institutions to better support their program directors and the overall success of their AANAPISI programs.

Introduction

The Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) federal designation is now ten years old and has accumulated a steadily growing body of research that has generally fallen into two categories—tracing the origins and growth of the designation (National Commission on AAPI Research in Education [CARE], 2012; Park & Chang, 2009; Park & Teranishi, 2008), and demonstrating the impact of AANAPISI programs on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student belonging, persistence, and completion (CARE, 2014; Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Museus, Wright-Mair, & Mac, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018). As the youngest designation to the Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) category, it has been critical for AANAPISIs to demonstrate their contribution to

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improving racial minority students' success alongside their MSI peers. Now a decade old and a more established designation within the MSI category, scholarship on AANAPISIs must turn their attention toward the future of the program, moving from programmatic success to the yet to be examined foci of programmatic replicability and sustainability.

The replication of successful programs and sustenance of their impact has implications for the general growth and success of AANAPISIs. In a time when the administration's plans for MSI funding remains unclear (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), however, these areas of focus become even more significant as institutions face increased pressure to make the most of their funding within the limited grant timelines and to do so in a manner that ensures students are supported in perpetuity should the funding not be replenished. Given these stakes, it is necessary to transition from the examination of AANAPISI programs broadly to the actualization of the grants—a process that can only be explored by diving into the detailed, day-to-day, contours of the programs themselves. This meticulous perspective of AANAPISI programs is known and experienced only by program directors who are charged with executing their institutions' grant proposals. As such, program directors are wells of knowledge for the possibilities of replication and sustainability and are the feature of this brief.

AANAPISI Leaders

Given the focus on establishing the impact of AANAPISI programs on student success, there is a dearth of literature that centers the perspectives of AANAPISI leaders or leadership as ends in and of themselves (Adrian Hiyane-Brown & Story, 2018; Teranishi, Alcantar & Underwood, 2018). In one of the very few studies of institutional agents at AANAPISIs, Alcantar, Bordoloi-Pazich, and Teranishi (in press) explore how practitioners make meaning of their pursuit of the AANAPISI designation, and how those interpretations influence their practice. The authors find that there is a reciprocal relationship between institutional agents and their organizations—both influencing one another. What this affirms is that program directors at AANAPISIs must navigate that reciprocity and can have an impact on their campuses through that process—a process from

which important lessons are learned, success can be replicated, and programs sustained. It is important to note that context matters and that not all AANAPISIs are the same. As such, replication in this sense leans more toward guidance than prescription. That stated, as research on leaders at other types of MSIs reveal, there are patterns of effective leadership that can be considered to cultivate success (Bowen, et al., 2018; Esters et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2018).

This brief uses those studies as models, offering practical insights shared by two program directors at different types of AANAPISIs—one two-year and one four-year. While their perspectives vary by nature of their specific organizations and experiences, the findings featured are mutually reinforced insights that emerged from both program directors in four semi-structured interviews (two each). These considerations are offered temporally, starting with how program directors can prepare for the start of the AANAPISI grant, how to execute their institutions' grant proposal, and finally, how to sustain the success of grant activities.

Preparing for the AANAPISI

More often than not, program directors are stepping into AANAPISI grants that are based on proposals that they were not involved in writing. In some instances, program directors are managing those pre-determined program goals in a campus environment that is equally unfamiliar, creating a situation that takes considerable time to acclimate. Given the short lifespans of AANAPISI grants (typically 5 years), however, program directors' timely transition may define how effective both the program director and the program can be. Whether program directors are stepping into an entirely new grant or are preparing to take on a proposal that they helped cultivate, the following considerations may be helpful to ensure that they hit the ground running as they prepare for the start of the AANAPISI.

Check Assumptions

Both program directors shared stories about surprises that emerged as they navigated their AANAPISI grants, and discussed the importance of checking their assumptions about expectations. For example, the

program director at the two-year institution, reflected, “[...] if you build it, they will come, right? We had all these initiatives. We were supposed to do first-year experiences. But what we created, we started off with [...] a first-year experience having three classes, right? Well, we only had six students register and apply for it.” The program director goes on, “And really, if we build it, they didn’t come because they don’t know about you. Your institution didn’t know about you, your faculty and staff, your students didn’t know about you. So, we had to take a step back.”

The program director at the four-year institution had a similar revelation while attending a meeting with other AANAPISIs:

I remember sitting in this meeting [...] last year, not sure what to expect, thought it was going to look and feel like other environments with other federal grants that I’ve been in where it’s very much sort of about the reporting and [...] very strategic and sort of dull. And it wasn’t that at all. And I remember thinking, “Oh my god, where am I? What is happening right now? This was not what I was expecting,” and really had to sort of check my own assumptions coming in and then was trying to understand.

While federal grants and student support programs, such as first-year orientation, can at times reflect one another, these program directors demonstrate that considering any assumptions made about the AANAPISI grant and program can be useful for preparing for unexpected outcomes, and for being more deliberate about execution.

See the Big Picture

In addition to checking their assumptions, program directors discussed the need to not get too lost in the details, but to see the program from a broader point of view, asking more general questions about who the program is serving, and what it means to be an AANAPISI program within a larger institution. The four-year AANAPISI program director stated, for example,

[...] the institution is definitely having this conversation and I think has done some good work to understand what does this population look like on our campus, what does that mean, what are the things in place...and I think that those larger conversations are sort of happening in the 30,000-foot range. [The AANAPISI program] sort of lives within that [conversation].

The two-year program director echoed the same sentiment commenting, “You’ve got to think, in a weird sense, seeing [it] at that 30,000-foot level, but always being present through this process to get to that road. I think you got to have that vision”. Although by nature of their task to manage the grant activities day by day, program directors will be pulled into the particulars of their programs, it is equally important to balance that perspective with the big picture. This widened view of the program, the program directors suggest, helps with the forward-thinking, planning, and integration of the program into their institutions, which foregrounds the conversation about sustainability.

Be Flexible

Perhaps the most obvious recommendation as program directors prepare for their grants is to be flexible in terms of being open to new approaches and willing to test different ideas. The four-year program director shared their views on this important trait:

There is room for everyone and room for a lot of different ways of approaching [it]. And so, I’ve become very comfortable with that too, and I think about that when there’s a sort of the why this and not that. Well, why not? If something works, yeah, why not? And we have so many students on the campus [...]. There will not be one size fits all. And we see that in [the AANAPISI program] all the time. And I think if it’s the kind of person that’s comfortable being in a situation or an environment where you have to be flexible, you have to learn and adjust.

Affirming this view, when asked what concrete skills an AANAPISI program director should possess, the two-year program director immediately responded, “I’d say it’s flexibility of skill. Let’s say being flexible and understanding how fluid and un-fluid things can be”. The program director also states, “This type of grant, you’re expected to just run with it and you’re supposed to have everything in place. That doesn’t work like that, I don’t think for anyone,” and concludes “we had to do the adjustments.” As expected with any program, there may be unexpected changes. As such, possessing the skill to be nimble in the face of those speed bumps can prove to be an invaluable tool as program directors prepare for the AANAPISI.

Executing the AANAPISI

The early years of the AANAPISI grant are for building a strong foundation, however, it is also during this time that many of the challenges and barriers emerge as programs experience growing pains. Even for program directors who well prepare for their grants, the execution of the proposed plans can be riddled with obstacles including institutional policies that stall progress, lack of administrative support and/or budgeting constraints. The program directors offer the following advice for strengthening the program’s ability to overcome these possible hurdles and to move forward in an effective and productive manner.

Embrace Detours

Analogous to being flexible in the preparation stage, program directors should embrace the detours that emerge in the execution phase. Different from acknowledging that being flexible is a necessary skill, embracing the detours is defined by acting upon that skill set to maneuver the needed modifications. In the case of the two-year program director, embracing detours meant realizing that before intended activities could be initiated, there was the unexpected marketing phase that needed to first be addressed:

In all honesty, it took [the] program a whole cycle to really focus on the real engagement. [...] It was very intentional that I wanted to brand this for at least three, four years, because I knew that for a first-year experience type pipeline to work, you have to get those buy-ins. We’re finally able to [...] do that this coming year. So [...] all these efforts are able to do now what we’re supposed to do in the beginning.

Although technically behind schedule, the program director reflects, “[...] you’re expected to just keep running, just go and hit all these points. And in many ways, we’ve hit all those points along the way. It just isn’t the conventional way of what you had written down on the grant”. In this instance, marketing seemed to be off-target, but was in fact, part of embracing the detours to ensure a heightened execution of the AANAPISI grant. Likewise, the program director at the four-year institution had to be nimble in implementing their program. To demonstrate, the program director shared:

And in that [first] year, we discovered multiple needs that we had not thought about, assessed for, and we constantly tried to work to figure out some of that. Sometimes it has worked, sometimes we haven’t, so we’ve done things and eliminated it. So, what that meant was we ended up developing something more robust going into year two.

As these program directors would confirm, programs hardly ever come to fruition as grant proposals dictate and embracing the inevitable detours can be a useful skill in executing, and strengthening, the AANAPISI.

Engage Allies

A second and equally significant consideration for program directors to execute their grants effectively is to engage allies. Engaging with colleagues across campus emerges differently for each program, depending on the grant activities, but are universally effective for 1) responding to possible

challenges, and 2) embedding the program within the broader institution. For example, the two-year program director developed collaborative relationships with faculty for their first-year programs:

So really, it was calling, emailing faculty that I knew with the support of our administration and say, “Hey, is it possible to allocate five, six spaces? Can you close it off, your class schedule, early? We’d love to insert our students into your class,” right? So, these are some ways that we got in.

Leveraging these relationships helped the program overcome the barrier of overly full introductory classes, and also ensured that the AANAPISI program becomes integrated into the regular course scheduling. For the four-year program director, engaging allies included drawing connections with other campus divisions:

It began with our colleague in the division of [removed for confidentiality] saying, “So I got this population, and we really need to be able to provide services because there’s something missing, and they’re not retaining [...] and we need to be able to do more. This isn’t working right”, and us saying, “Okay, well maybe that’s our population,” to then, “Okay, something worked. Now let’s try to do it again and figure out what worked.”

Although in this case the relationship was established by a colleague, formulating cross-campus relationships are valuable for further integrating the AANAPISI as it becomes part and parcel with other institutional programs and practices. As such, implementing the grant with this in mind is useful for both execution and sustainability.

Reassess Each Year

Finally, in executing the AANAPISI grant, program directors had to continuously reassess their programs’ success, coming full circle back to embracing detours as their assessments revealed needed modifications.

At the four-year AANAPISI, for example, the program director shared that their “original goal was low input, high impact.” With this instruction, the program began the task of implementing and learning from the program:

[...] we built this program, and it seemed to have really notable results in the first year that we thought, “Oh, okay. Well, there’s something about this that seems to be working. Well, let’s keep going, and next year let’s try to get up to the 50-mark and bring in a more solid cohort.” And so, we set about working towards that.

As the program began to become more established, however, the program director learned that “the implementation has been a challenge because we’ve had to add so much structure and have had to constantly have a finger on the pulse to say, ‘No, we need to go left,’ and make the adjustments,” part of the embracing detours advisement. In constantly assessing their program and making these adjustments, the program has “moved very far away from low input.” Recognizing when shifts need to be made is a byproduct of the continuous assessment that happens year to year.

The same important lessons were learned at the two-year AANAPISI where a formal needs assessment was conducted. The project director reflected on the results:

I think in the needs assessment was [the finding that] we were this ball of fire and we just go with the intention of doing right, in doing good for our communities and for our students. And we don’t have time, never any time, always new things, always new projects, always projects, projects through the whole year.

Through the assessment, the program director realized the need to take stock, build a marketing plan, and reinstate activities with a renewed AANAPISI brand. While responding to the evolving demands of the program produced by assessments is challenging, it is central to know how to effectively execute the AANAPISI grant.

Sustaining the AANAPISI

As AANAPISI programs become more established on their campuses, the pressure to consider how to sustain programmatic efforts often arises. Whether from external, internal or self-produced pressures, the question of sustainability is likely on many AANAPISI program directors' radars, particularly in the contemporary landscape when budgeting constraints are a source of constant concern. Amidst the mandates to smoothly initiate the grant and make the proposed activities come to life, program directors are also faced with the nearly immediate demand to think about how to integrate the AANAPISI grant should funding cease at the close of the grant timeline. As can be imagined, achieving all these aims within the typical five-year lifespan of a grant is a feat. With a few years of experience behind them, the program directors in this brief offer their insights for sustaining the AANAPISI grant.

Collaborate with the Academic Unit/Division

At both institutions, the AANAPISI proposal had a centralized academic focus that required the program directors to collaborate with and work within their colleges' academic unit/division. For the two-year AANAPISI, offering courses in the first-year programs and learning community were one of the key directives in the proposal, hence the program director's efforts to work with faculty. In so doing, the program director came to the realization:

You need instructors, you need the collaboration, things that would have been difficult to establish [on our own]. Like classes have not been a challenge so much for us. Instructors really support one another in ways I didn't see happen when we were programming under student services. And I don't know why that is. I don't know, but I can say it hasn't been that difficult.

Although this may be a rare case that collaborating with academic affairs was smoother than with student services, and certainly not true for all campuses, it does point to the fact that these collaborations with the academic division are important for both instituting the AANAPISI

program, and for integrating it into an existing, and more stable, college structure. In the case of the four-year AANAPISI, the program has been budgeted into their academic unit, as the outcomes of the program have proven it to be a valuable feature that should be ongoing. Academic units that have room for these budgetary decisions are one possible resource for sustaining the AANAPISI. Even in cases when AANAPISI programs are not centered on academics or the academic division does not have financial flexibility, academic divisions are rigid and slow to change—opposite from the AANAPISI grants, which could be a fleeting addition to the institution. Integrating features of the program into the more established unit secures a more likely pathway to sustainability.

Align with Institutional Efforts/Strategic Plan

Another opportunity for sustaining the AANAPISI program is to align the grant with the broader institutional efforts/strategic plan. Often times, there is already some alignment as the proposal is being written and the AANAPISI program is born of those parallels. At the four-year institution, for example, the grant supported retention efforts for students involved in a different program, and later overlapped with their AANAPISI program. In fact, the program had already existed in a pilot form and was reinforced by AANAPISI funding. At the two-year institution, the AANAPISI was an addition to their collection of learning communities. The program director shares, "At [two-year AANAPISI], we're very proud that we have Umoja. We're very proud to have Puente. We're very proud to have MESA, TRIO [...]." Being one of these learning communities helps align the program with the institution's source of pride and heightens the support of the program. In both of these cases, the alignment of values foregrounded the proposal writing. If there is an instance that the program development is not directly aligned with the institutional efforts, it becomes all the more important for program directors to consider how that alignment can be achieved. In so doing, administrators may be more likely to support the grant and sustain its program beyond the life of the funding.

Recommendations for AANAPISIs

While this brief focuses on practical considerations for program directors, the success of AANAPISI grants should not rest on the shoulders of program directors, alone. Institutions, broadly, have equal responsibility in ensuring that AANAPISIs are well executed and sustained. Based on the insights from program directors, these recommendations are offered for institutions that are planning to submit an AANAPISI proposal or currently executing their grants.

Provide Campus Resources

As AANAPISI program directors navigate the many obstacles that emerge in executing a grant, campuses can offer critical support by providing campus resources that are already available, and deliberate these as early as when proposals are being written. Consider: what resources do we already have that can be tapped to undergird the efforts of the program? One example is assessment tools—are there resources, either people or software, that can be used by the program to conduct their yearly internal assessments? Can assessment of the program be folded into broader campus evaluations? Another example may be as simple as inviting AANAPISI staff to partake in conversations related to broader institutional efforts. Access to these conversations may open up opportunities for tapping into resources that AANAPISI program directors are otherwise unknowledgeable about as they are in the early stages of navigating the campus. Provision of existing resources can help alleviate some of the challenges related to the transition process of program directors and offer resolutions to other unexpected barriers that emerge.

Foster Cross-Campus Collaboration

Building upon the provision of resources, is the resource of human capital. Institutions can help foster cross-campus collaborations between the AANAPISI programs and other offices, units and divisions. While program directors are charged with establishing working relationships, institutions can support their efforts by offering guidance, brokering introductions, and suggesting partnerships that have yet to be considered. As complex organizations, colleges and universities are difficult to navigate and

program directors, particularly those new to campus, will take some time to transition. Institutions at the stage of proposal writing, and certainly at the point of execution, can help smooth the process by offering ideas for what collaborations may be possibilities.

Consider how the AANAPISI Program can Align with the Institution

In addition to executing the daily details of the program, this brief calls on program directors to see the big picture in order to envision the future of the grant. While this is important for program directors, it is also the responsibility of institutions to construct this vision in a manner that fits the organizations' aims. To do so, it is recommended that institutions offer recommendations for how the AANAPISI program can best align with the institution. Consider: how do AANAPISI programs support our current efforts/strategic plan? Are there other ways that the AANAPISI program can strengthen their alignment? What other gaps can the AANAPISI program fill that fits within their purview? By offering these insights, institutions can support program directors' success while reinforcing their own strategies, and open up the possibility of sustaining a productive program that meets the institutional mission.

Conclusion

The cliché phrase that practitioners wear many hats could have been written about AANAPISI program directors. Program directors are called upon to transition to new campuses and unfamiliar grants and to do so quickly. They are asked to handle every programmatic detail, while maintaining the big picture. They must navigate administration, manage staff, and support students. Put together, the vast demands make program directors a wealth of knowledge for how AANAPISI grants are actualized and can be better executed and sustained. Featuring program directors' insights offers both practical considerations for other current and future program directors, and also contributes to the growing literature on how to further strengthen the ten-year-old AANAPISI federal program and to sustain its impact on campuses across the nation for another decade.

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