

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

KIRAN AHUJA

By Dorothy Villarreal



Many students are aware that there are institutions in the United States that serve particular populations such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs); however, students are unaware that there are six other federally designated institution types, such as Asian American and Native Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) that exist. Kiran Ahuja spent six years as the Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders where she led efforts to increase access, resources, and programs for these institutions. During an interview, Kiran spoke about her path through the world of higher education, her experiences working with Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and philanthropy.

Kiran Ahuja was raised in Savannah, Georgia to parents that immigrated from India and England. In Savannah, Kiran was exposed to some of the challenges facing the inner city's communities. Kiran spoke at length about her experience as an Asian-American woman at Spelman College, the oldest private liberal arts HBCU for women.

“Spelman was a really formative period for me, and it was a little bit haphazard how I ended up there. I transferred from another university in Atlanta, and I don't think I fully appreciated what an HBCU could offer until I was actually there.” She continues, “I was attracted to the size of the school, that it was all

women, and had really great professors who were clearly invested in their students. [They] made some pretty broad assumptions about the fact that all the women they were teaching...were going to be leaders once they left and were going to achieve great things in whatever arena they found themselves in. I really appreciated that level of confidence and investment.”

When asked about her time at Spelman, and her experience, Kiran spoke about not really knowing much about HBCUs, had it not been for friends at the time that were attending Spelman. However, she believes that is changing now. “There are students who are not African-American who are attending HBCUs. I was the only Asian-American at the time (in the early '90's) and if there were non-African Americans, they were international students.” For Kiran, learning at an HBCU taught her an invaluable experience regarding the U.S.'s culture and history. “It further confirmed for me the kind of work I wanted to do later on, which [meant] getting involved in civil rights issues. It was one of the first things I did...” Her experience at Spelman gave her a solid foundation for the work she was to do in years to come.

The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders “was a pretty broad initiative.”

The others were focused on education, but we worked with 20-plus agencies on a host of issues. We developed a lot of work and expertise related to AANAPISIs because we had such a vibrant group of presidents and other administrators, community leaders, and people on the Hill, who, since the inception of AANAPISIs, were very interested in building the profile. Our challenge was figuring out how to increase the funding for AANAPISIs compared to HSIs and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). It was a bit of a struggle.”

Kiran went on to discuss the difficulties that they would work through with other initiatives.

“We didn't really have those pressure points like members on the Hill would have. Many of the institutions were stuck

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in a really difficult spot, whether they should pursue AANAPISI or HSI funding... I think the department also felt that if it increased one they had to increase all.” Kiran turned to this topic later, saying, “I always thought there was this challenge of how small the pot was for AANAPISIs, compared to others, and so, I think that was a bit of an Achilles heel for us.”

A triumph while working in the Initiative was working together with AANAPISIs, and broader Asian-American leaders, community advocacy groups, and educators to work around data disaggregation. It had a real impact on how states and other institutions are looking at data:

“In Washington state, for example, I think they’ll be the first state to actually incorporate the level of data disaggregation in the K-12 space. They’re in the implementation phase now, and so, I think it’ll be important to see what that looks like; for what could be modeled in other states.” She cautions of opposition. “In Massachusetts, there’s been this opposition by Chinese-Americans, conservative Chinese-Americans, to oppose any bill on data disaggregation in education. It presents an interesting dynamic, I think, within the Asian-American community.”

Kiran is the current CEO of Philanthropy Northwest, where she continues the work of bridging communities with resources.

“Broadly speaking, I think there’s a real disconnect with the government, federal government grant programs, and foundations...especially those who fund an education space. A lot of what we were trying to do when I was at the White House initiative was to build those bridges and have those conversations. We always say in philanthropy that, between government and philanthropic dollars, it’s like apples and oranges.” She continued, “Government funds in billions, and philanthropy in thousands...but really can’t replace [the government funding]. But...if you know where the government allocates its funds, how can philanthropy leverage or provide some flexibility...to really make the most out of that money?”

Kiran spoke of the frustration at the ways in which some of the governmental grants are administered and monitored, sometimes rejecting institutions over minuscule details such as font size or word spacing due to lack of expertise and overwhelmed staff with little expertise in the area. At some point, she elucidates, “it’s just about pushing money out, but not saying, ‘Okay, how is this money being used? How is it moving in the field?’ It’s a huge loss for the kind of money that goes out the door.”

Kiran sees philanthropy as being able to address this issue. “We have a Momentum Fellowship Program that’s basically a pipeline to bring more people of color into philanthropy. [Participants] want to get a feel of what philanthropy looks like, just to have a better understanding...so they can be better fundraisers...or they may see that real change can happen through philanthropy. We’re seeing this change, and the demographic shifts in our country. The question is, do the institutions follow? And at what pace?”

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled “Understanding Minority Serving Institutions,” in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.