

Empowerment Through Engagement

A living laboratory for Cal State Fullerton thrives at the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance, whose mission is to empower people to assume leadership within their community. According to founding Executive Director Mary Anne Foo, the organization's approach since it was established in 1997 is to inspire people to develop their own leadership skills by identifying problems that are important to them, and digging into them to come up with solutions that work. In this way, OCAPICA empowers people to define and control their own lives and the future of their community – while at the same time making a real difference through relevant and timely interventions.

Into this rich environment of potential for applied learning and service, a steady stream of Cal State Fullerton students has flowed through the organization since its inception. Indeed, it was students serving internships at the site who led the director back to campus to explore the resources and partnerships that the university offers. Finding plentiful opportunities at the agency, the students were able to link the realities of their personal, family, neighborhood and cultural experiences to their classroom studies. That is the ideal for any internship, but what makes the OCAPICA experience so unusual is that students are empowered to take charge of all aspects of a program – from identifying a problem, to researching and proposing a solution, and then implementing the intervention and assessing the results. Pursuing the OCAPICA mission to develop their abilities to control and define their lives is a perfect model for students who are about to wrap up their degrees and take their place in the world.

“All our interns love the campus and the education they are getting, but they also have a good work history, professionalism, and are more mature,” Foo said. “They can really apply what they’re learning in class to their work. All the students we’ve had from Cal State Fullerton are really good. They are smart and have good skills.”

Foo decided to investigate where these students were coming from, so she asked about their professors and classes. Students forged the link that connected Foo to several faculty members, who in turn connected her to campus research centers and resources. She invited faculty and researchers to engage with the organization in pursuing its mission, and the partnerships that resulted led to deeper and more complex approaches to the agency's programming. Faculty members brought theoretical modeling to the table, and techniques for applying evidence-based models. These methods, Foo said, allowed OCAPICA to focus and frame its work. This led to the agency's deeper involvement in public policy, an area that can be overwhelming or intimidating for many small nonprofits. “Cal State Fullerton really influences us in thinking beyond direct services and everyday needs, to long-term strategies to address future needs,” Foo said. “You helped us to not be reactive, but proactive.”

Mary Anne Foo, founding executive director of the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA)



OCAPICA received a 2011 Community Engagement Award as Outstanding Community Partner in tribute to its extraordinary efforts to engage CSUF students and meet their needs as service-learners or interns, project leaders and community members. Their commitment to developing volunteers' personal leadership capabilities and professional and personal skills translates into powerful experiences for all those who engage with them.

Dr. Jennifer A. Yee, Asian American Studies Program



Dr. Yee received a CSUF Community Engagement Award as Outstanding Service-Learning Instructor in 2011 in recognition of the robust opportunities for engagement that she developed for her course, Civic Engagement Through Asian American & Pacific Islander Studies. With mini-grants from the Faculty Development Center and CICE, she worked with OCAPICA over three years to identify the need for volunteer recruitment strategies; to develop, test and assess a service-learning approach; then to roll out the course in fall 2010 and spring 2011. The classes' success attracted additional support for the Asian American Studies program and OCAPICA from the Southern California Edison Diversity Initiative to continue attracting volunteers to mentor students at Bolsa Grande High School.



Dr. Tu-Uyen Nguyen,
Asian American Studies
Department

Dr. Nguyen has been involved with OCAPICA since its inception in 1997, serving as one of the organization's first interns. Today, she is involved as a member of OCAPICA's board of directors and actively collaborates with community partners on several community-based participatory research action projects, including health navigation. She also works with many students on the organization's volunteer, internship and

service-learning projects. Nguyen received a CSUF Community Engagement Award as Outstanding Service-Learning Instructor in 2010 in recognition of her contributions in teaching Community-Based Health Research and Field Studies, a course which empowered students to become leaders for social justice work through applied research and social action.



Dr. Sora Park Tanjasiri,
professor and director,
Health Promotion Research
Institute, Department of
Health Science

Dr. Tanjasiri is a founding member of OCAPICA's board and project director of several community-based participatory research efforts that have led to better information about the incidences of cancer among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and to awareness and prevention programs that improve their health outcomes.

Foo credits OCAPICA's increased success in landing federal grants for research projects to the sophisticated, evidence-based tools that Cal State Fullerton faculty and research centers helped to create. Faculty investigators and researchers working with OCAPICA have achieved significant results in health awareness and prevention among Asian and Pacific Islander women, because the projects provide greater access to cancer screening and other health resources. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention recently awarded OCAPICA with a National Center of Excellence designation for their efforts to eliminate disparities in health, based on their community-based participatory research partnerships with Cal State Fullerton as well as Claremont Graduate University, UC Irvine, UCLA School of Public Health and the University of Southern California.

Students directly experience OCAPICA's mission of empowerment and leadership development. The ratio of staff to interns is about one-to-one, so at any given time interns are actively engaged in working out issues through firsthand observation and program implementation. They are not there simply to function as office help or staff assistants. They learn by doing and deepen their classroom knowledge through practice.

OCAPICA's mental health program is the result of one such intern's efforts. An honors student whose parent had a gambling addiction, he was depressed because he felt he had nowhere to go for help. For his internship he identified the need for mental health counseling, designed an intervention and tapped into the resources of Cal State Fullerton's Master of Social Work program for help in implementing it. In another example, students recognized the health risk their mothers face through exposure to the toxins in their workplaces: nail salons. The students developed an awareness and prevention program to address these risks.

Through course-related and voluntary service, our university campus contributes to impacts such as improved health, safer and cleaner neighborhoods, more college-bound kids, better public policy, and a more engaged populace. Learning and scholarship outcomes are deeper and more complex because of ongoing partnerships with the community. As Foo related, our faculty are unusual in their collegiality, their willingness to reach out across disciplines and departments to work creatively and cooperatively with one another and with community partners in pursuit of research, learning and service. The living laboratory that our faculty and partners create for our students in the community is a great realization of the vision expressed in OCAPICA's mission: a new generation of leaders who have the capacity to control and define their lives and the future of the community.