

Dana Nakano '04

What was it like to be a leader in the APA community was like during your time at Penn?

I was at Penn from Fall 2000 to Spring 2004, with a brief hiatus in Fall 2002 while studying abroad. When I look back on that time at Penn, I remember a lot of collaboration with other student of color organizations, in particular, APSC, UMC, Umoja, and Latino Coalition. Back then, nothing about our coalition of coalitions was formalized, it was just a group of us who knew each other, were friends, and knew that in order to get anything done on campus, we would have to work together. It wasn't always easy...in fact, it took a lot of work, but we forged great relationships and trust.

Often, it felt like there was a disconnect between the leaders of the coalitions and the constituent organizations regarding the sharing of information and agenda setting...which was definitely a problem. Looking back, there could have been more transparency, but at the same time, I think that part of it is the nature of the beast. Too many cooks in the kitchen may not make for the most effective mobilization. Its hard to know where to draw the line.

This disconnect and the strong relationship among coalition leaders lead to the founding of Student Movement for Change, which was an autonomous organization that allowed the coalition leadership to act on issues that the coalition constituent members did not want to spend coalition time on. We felt these issues (academic dept/programs losing funding and enrollment was our main issue) needed addressing and decided to work together outside our coalition capacities to affect change in these areas. We recruited a few other student leaders to join the group, but for the most part it was kept pretty small to keep us under the radar.

The biggest accomplishment of SMC was the promotion of USCAR, the US cultures analysis requirement. While USCAR was not instated while I was there, or while SMC still existed I think...a version of this requirement now exists in the college. I am not going to lie...I am pretty proud of this, even if the form of the actual requirement isn't quite what we had in mind.

How has your involvement shaped your life after Penn?

I don't think that it would be an overstatement for me to say that my entire life after graduation has been in some way directed by my involvement and activism at Penn. I am currently pursuing my PhD in sociology, focusing on issues of race and politics, particularly among Asian Americans. I don't know if such a career path would have even dawned on me if not for my time as a student activist. More than the time I spent in the classroom, even ASAM classes (Sorry, Dr. Azuma...but he knows I love him.), my time with APSC and SMC gave me greater insight into the marginality and unique racialized experience of Asian Americans. I didn't just read about it in texts, I experienced it first hand. My life since Penn has been filled with experiences where I have tried to engage change and give back to a community and population whose needs are often overlooked due to perceptions of foreignness and model minority status. The APA Penn experience provided me with a critical lens that has served me tremendously in my academic and professional life.