



The Latino Caucus

presents a comprehensive report on

Multicultural Centers to House Diverse Communities

**An assessment of University
Park's multicultural spaces as
well as those across the B1G
Ten**

*Authored by the Latino Caucus
University Relations Committee*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the Fall of 2018, the Latino Caucus University Relations Committee began exploring the logistics and benefits of overhauling the multicultural spaces provided for students of color.

Our research led us to examine peer institutions and anecdotal evidence from student leaders across the community who have first-hand experience engaging with the spaces. It is through this research and a subsequent formulation of an ideal space that this report hopes to bring to fruition a better, more efficient multicultural space.

The contents of this report are as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Multicultural Spaces in Peer Institutions
3. Problems with the Existing Structure
4. Necessary Changes
5. Benefits of a New Space
6. Recommendations
7. Conclusions

It is this committee's hope that this report can be delivered to the Vice President of Student Affairs Damon Sims. More specifically, it is our express hope that this report can lead to a systematic overhaul and rethinking with respect to the spaces provided for multicultural and underrepresented students at Penn State.

INTRODUCTION

Over 45 years ago Penn State established the first cultural center which is informally known as the “House That Students Built” because of the grassroots efforts of students who envisioned and helped bring it to life. That center lives on today as the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC) and has served as a catalyst for the growth and vibrancy of the multicultural life here at Penn State. Visiting the Center on any given day provides proof-positive that it strives to achieve its stated goal of providing cultural, educational and social support. However, like any other entity, it is necessary to maintain and refashion it in order to adapt to the changing reality on-the-ground. For Penn State, that reality has been more multicultural students than ever before in terms of sheer numbers as well a diversification in terms of their race, ethnicity, and nationalities. It is for that very reason that the Latino Caucus believes the current structure of the space provided for multicultural students falls short of what is necessary to house as many diverse communities as we have and a result hinders the aforementioned benefits of fostering unity, promoting culturally educational programs, and enabling advocates and activism. A solution to this issue would look like a renovated space that would allow for more multicultural organizations to work in. It would have a structure similar to the PRCC, however it would be enhanced so that the three multicultural caucuses have a space that specializes in the needs of those communities while at the same time being housed within a single building to promote unity and overall cohesion. Ideally, this would happen through an overall expansion of the PRCC within the HUB in the same area the PRCC currently occupies. In the following section, we present research done by our committee into the analogous spaces of peer institutions as means of exploring what exists that can serve as a model.

MULTICULTURAL SPACES IN PEER INSTITUTIONS

The Latino Caucus researched analogous structures at peer institutions with a focus on schools in the Big Ten. The following schools were chosen based on the strength of their multicultural spaces and the degree to which those spaces enhance student life for diverse and multicultural populations. It is our hope that by presenting them and the resources they offer, a better understanding of what is possible here at University Park becomes clearer and administration can have useful comparisons to take into account when choosing to enhance the current spaces.

Rutgers University

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Rutgers University offers three centers for students of underrepresented communities to connect with one another. This is a great resource to have within the university because it gives students a chance to connect with other people with whom they relate. Rutgers has three separate “community areas” that focus on the needs of students within those communities. They have an Asian American Cultural Center which specializes in working with the Asian American Student organizations and departments to ensure there are activities available for the Rutgers Community. Additionally, the Center for Latino Arts and Culture focuses on the research, documentation, and promotion of not Latino culture as well as Hispanic, Caribbean, and Latin-American arts and culture. Lastly, the Paul Robeson Center gives African-American Students a space that provides educational, cultural, and social resources.

University of Iowa

The University of Iowa has four separate cultural centers that provide specialized support for the various marginalized communities found on campus. They provide opportunities for professional development as well as various educational resources. All the spaces are close to campus and are considered a safe space for students congregate and build community. Our committee was fond of the idea of giving individual spaces for the various multicultural groups on campus. This is a model we hope to see here in University Park with the major difference being that they be housed within a singular building so as to promote unity and solidarity.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

The University of Wisconsin-Madison offers resources for the various multicultural groups enrolled in their university. The American Indian Student Cultural Center and the Black Cultural Center provide students with a space that caters to their needs as minority students both educationally and professionally. Additionally, UW has a DACA student support team which helps DACA-recipients in ways that regular staff cannot for various reasons. Our takeaway from UW was their attention to detail with respect to immigrant, international and foreign students. Students at Penn State who are DACA recipients often find themselves in the air and in need of professional advice and counseling.

University of Indiana

Similar to the University of Iowa, the University of Indiana has four multicultural centers. The university has an African American Arts Institute, La Casa Latina Cultural Center, Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center and the LGBTQ+ Culture Center. These resources are important to the multicultural student body as they provide a centralized form of community for thousands

of people. The specialized resources allows for students to meet their various educational, cultural and professional needs. The Latino Caucus University Relations Committee finds that the University of Indiana does a particularly effective job at designing their centers to be cultural hubs in terms of style and appeal.

University of Pennsylvania

University of Pennsylvania has its own center dedicated to meeting the needs of its Latino students; this center is known as Casa Latina. In its initial stages, faculty members split their time between their departments and running the center as they transitioned into bringing in dedicated staff. This center provides resources necessary for its students including a steering committee, the ear of the university president and funds to fulfill initiatives and programming. Other available resources include programs like “Café Con Leche” which brings students together over light refreshments to discuss contemporary sociopolitical issues and to disseminate information for first generation and low-income students. The students also use this center as a space to host their mentoring program and student-led publication.

In the next section, we will systematically examine the issues with the current structure of the PRCC and the spaces provided for multicultural students.

ISSUES WITH THE EXISTING STRUCTURE

The current model for multicultural spaces falls short in key areas whose repercussions are felt beyond their initial impact. In this section, we list them and include anecdotal evidence from student leaders who have experience utilizing the spaces in both recreational and professional

contexts. The first and most glaring issue is that of space; the Paul Robeson Cultural Center simply does not have the space to accommodate the Black, Latino, and Asian Pacific Islander Desi American caucuses let alone the organizations that fall under their umbrellas. It is an annual point of contention when it comes time to allocate office space to organizations seeking them and the end result has often been physical separation of groups whose efficiency and reach depends, in part, on their proximity and close collaboration. Aside from office space, lounge space in the PRCC is limited to the lobby area, the center room, and the computer lab in the back. We believe that recreational spaces are valuable insofar as they provide a space where different groups and people can interact which in turn has a positive effect on our efforts in the way of diversity and inclusion.

Another issue present in the current model is the way in which its structure divides resources to different locations and decreases the likelihood that students will find them. Further in this document, we argue that a more centralized multicultural center would see an increase in students taking advantage of the resources offered to them because they would all be offered in the same space.

One of the unintended consequences of the current system is that responsibilities fall disproportionately on some faculty more than others which often stifles the possibility that students can be connected to the resources that they need. Finally, the Latino Caucus argues that for the Multicultural Resource Center (MRC) and the PRCC to optimize their usefulness to students, they should be housed together. The current system provides little overlap between both centers despite offering the same kind of help to the same kind of students. While this

section is by no means exhaustive, it is a comprehensive examination of the structural issues of the current model and should serve as sufficient motivation to examine the ways administration and students can and should work together to enact changes and improvements. The next section speaks to the necessary changes which would resolve or mitigate the issues mentioned in this section.

NECESSARY CHANGES

This section offers changes, suggestions, and recommendations for the new multicultural center. The main difference between both centers would be what they include in terms of space, offerings, and amenities. The current PRCC model provides a (1) library (2) lounge area and (3) computer lab but unfortunately in too small a quantity when compared with the amount of people who use *and* those who *would* use it if more space were dedicated to them. We believe the library/study space would satisfy the space's academic purpose by giving students of color the opportunity to build community in a way that is also conducive to academic excellence. To further realize the goal of the PRCC to promote diversity and inclusion, the decoration and furnishings of the space would be similar to the current model which includes paintings, pieces of art, and plaques that highlights historical figures and events. Additionally, the lounge areas in the new space would need to be larger than they are now. One can walk into the PRCC on any given day and find that it is full, often with students sitting on the tables directly outside as a sort of "spill-over" from the main center. This speaks to the idea that if the space were expanded, it would be for good use because the demand exists and is evident. In addition to a general space, an ideal center would dedicate space to the main three communities it houses – Latino, Black, and Asian Pacific Islander Desi American. These would include a casual space for couches, a

TV, and culture-specific designs. They would also include an office for a staffer and locker space and filing cabinets for organizations. For groups like Latino Caucus and others which host large-scale annual programs, the ability to store documents and equipment would go a long way toward enabling them help the community through their outreach, programming, and advocacy efforts. Some of the Big Ten schools we researched for this proposal include a kitchen in their spaces for students who do not have access to one in their residence halls. We understand there are rules, regulations and liability concerns associated with including a kitchen space but because food is such an integral part of culture, we thought it important to at least include in case it is something feasible that can be implemented. Finally, like the PRCC, the new space would include conference rooms for student organizations to host meetings for programming and advocacy. The sum total of these changes would provide far-reaching benefits going beyond their initial positive impact; in the next section, we expound on the effects of such changes.

A brief word on location: This is clearly the outstanding logistical question but what we believe is most important is that the center be located centrally and prominently in order to attract the most students and act as an affirmation that Penn State is proud of its efforts in the way of diversity and inclusion. The Latino Caucus has included their suggestion in the Recommendations section below.

BENEFITS OF A NEW SPACE

In this section we argue that the option of creating a new space could and would ameliorate most, if not all shortcomings of the current structure. The increase in space provided by a new center would give organizations much needed room to realize their missions and accomplish more in a

given school year. Rather than being scattered between the MRC, the PRCC, and the HUB offices, they would be closer together. This physical proximity would allow student leaders and their organizations to form relationships and make connections that otherwise are not as likely to happen. This works to resolve a broader underlying issue within the multicultural community where groups can feel estranged from each other; the added stress of allocating limited space to the numerous diverse organizations would be greatly reduced with added space. The issue of dispersed resources would also be resolved with a structure that centralizes its offerings for students of color. We argue that centralizing resources for students would increase the likelihood that students take advantage of the breadth of what Penn State offers multicultural students. Staff members, like Melissa Landaru Vega and others, would also be housed closely together further accomplishing this goal of creating a hub for students of color. By decorating this space to be culture-specific (to Black, Latino, and Asian culture), it would give the spaces an educational and artistic element that distinguishes and highlights history and accomplishments within that culture.

Aside from the benefit to Penn State students who would utilize the spaces, the new center would provide a selling point for Penn State to use for outreach purposes. A common theme that arises when it comes to choosing a school for students of color is “fit.” Students want to go to a school that appreciates their diversity and finds ways to facilitate building community away from home. This is true for the writers of this proposal and for countless others for whom it is written. The creation of a new center for multicultural students would be a tangible, meaningful stride forward in the way of inclusion and equity, values previously affirmed through the All-In Campaign. It would provide fresh material to include in promotional materials, admissions

scouts, and tour guides as something which students of color can utilize and take advantage of during their time. By doing so, we also argue that it would have a positive effect on retention rates for students of color. Oftentimes it can be small issues which, left unattended, lead to students of color dropping out of higher education altogether. Centralizing resources and harnessing what faculty and staff have to offer will result in students more easily finding what they need to succeed and thrive at Penn State. The long-term effect for the university would be a lasting and recognized reputation for supporting underrepresented students by providing spaces that appreciates their diversity while at the same time being molded into leaders of tomorrow in their respective fields.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Recommendation: Penn State – University Park should execute a full-scale renovation of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, incorporating the Multicultural Resource Center, in order to centralize resources and meet the needs of the students of color as means of maximizing the positive effects of multicultural centers.

Increase the overall space offered in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center

- The current number of office spaces offered each year does not even begin to meet the amount of student organizations who would otherwise opt to share space with similar organizations (i.e. Latino Caucus and Black Caucus).
- The current location of the PRCC lends itself nicely to expanding upward into what is currently Heritage Hall and is already connected through a stairwell. That entire section of the HUB could be converted into a larger student center to house the growing number of multicultural communities.

Provide additional amenities

- Penn State should look to peer institutions to acquire similar amenities and services that their multicultural spaces offer.
 - This includes a general social area for the entire center, three smaller social areas for the main three groups (that is: Black, Latino, Asian), office spaces including rooms and cubicle style rooms, computers and printers for students, couches for the social area, TVs, a kitchen space (which already exists above the PRCC in Heritage Hall) and conference rooms for organizations.

Create a tripartite structure that provides dedicated space to Black, Latino, and Asian communities within reasonable distance to encourage unity and solidarity

- The structure should be thought of as a three-in-one and one-in-three structure; that is, it is one center meant to unify while giving space to the three multicultural groups on campus which are the Black, Latino Asian-Pacific Islander Desi American Caucuses. While each would have its own mini-center decorated according to its culture and history along with office spaces, there would be collaborative centers and a general open lounge to encourage people to build cross-cultural connections as a means of building solidarity and greater group cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This idea initially came together when the Latino Caucus realized that several, seemingly unrelated issues could be simultaneously resolved, or at the very least mitigated by a renovated multicultural space for the diverse populations. We position ourselves in the lineage and efforts of students who came before us and made the “House That Students Built” possible. One cannot understate what dedicated space for diverse communities has meant and done for this university and its recognized role in promoting diversity, inclusion and equity. As a Penn State value, it is of the utmost importance to take advantage of every opportunity that improve the quality of community students form during the four years they spend here. It is our firm belief that because we *can* do more, we *should* do more to expand the current structure to reflect today’s necessities and by doing so, set the standard for peer institutions on how to foster multicultural unity and development at all levels. Beyond the initial benefits to the caucuses and organizations that would benefit from such a space, Penn State would also benefit from increased retention rates for students of color and have a compelling selling point to attract diverse students to the university. The construction of a new space is thus a solution that benefits all relevant parties and reinforces Penn State’s commitment to inclusivity and to inspire all members of the community to take an active role in promoting respect and embracing diversity.