



The Importance of Student Centers for First Generation and Students of Color

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Montgomery College is the most diverse community college in the state of Maryland according to the Chronicle of Higher Education which gives us the opportunity to create a platform as the leaders in diversity and inclusion. Student centers that celebrate diversity and encourage students to express themselves give power to students that may otherwise feel marginalized in a system that historically, was not created for them. These spaces should have enough room for students to hold meetings, have a quiet space to re-charge, and an area where students can showcase their art. Students need to have a location that is made specifically for them. A space that is welcoming and made to encourage dialogue, acceptance, and support.

As a first-generation student of color, I know first-hand the difference a student center can make in academic achievement and perseverance. I was often in the Latino Student Union office or in my own sorority's office where I would feel comfortable enough to talk with my friends, plan for events, or just take a rest after a long day of walking around campus. It was our 'safe place', the only place that felt like a judgement-free zone on a huge, predominantly white campus like University of Maryland, College Park. I considered myself a student leader because I had a position on the Latino Student Club and because I was a Founding Sister and Vice President of the first Latina Sorority on campus, Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc.

Despite my humble beginnings where I would help my mom clean houses to make ends meet, I knew I was destined for something different. I didn't know what it was exactly, but I knew that I would not be cleaning houses as an adult unless it was my own home or my parent's home. I also knew that education was my ticket out of poverty. The only major I cared for was psychology. I would always hear that I was a good listener, and people would tell me their deepest, darkest secrets so I figured that I'd be a psychologist. I wanted to be a role model for students like me, that came from low-income backgrounds and had parents which had given everything up in their homelands like El Salvador to provide better futures for their children. I was determined to not to allow all of my parents' efforts to come to this country for a better future to go to waste.

In my safe places like the Latino Student Club office or the Lambda Theta Alpha office I would talk to other students who had very similar stories like mine. We would joke about all of our challenges because we knew there would not be any judgment. I could say how I was struggling to pay for my tuition or struggling to get through classes because I was exhausted from working and commuting to and from home to school to work. My best friend in college had to take care of her siblings, cook, and work to help her mother pay the rent. Another friend had 3 jobs that she had to keep because otherwise, she would not be able to pay her tuition. We all had similar stories and we supported and uplifted one another with our jokes, support, and respect. There was no shame or embarrassment over being poor or from coming from an immigrant background where you were expected to help your family over everything else.

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The day I was accepted into the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) internship program I let all my friends in the Latino club and sorority know and I encouraged them to apply for next year's internship program. I passed out applications and told them that the internship in the government would open doors that our parents could not help us with because of the language barriers or because they had little education themselves. I had found out about the opportunity through another club member.

My story is not unique. Sharon Bland, chief equity and inclusion officer, recalls going to the New Africa House and the Malcolm X Center in Amherst at University of Massachusetts and again at the Black Student Alliance, known as "The Black House" at Georgetown University. She has told me that within the first week of starting college, a friend of hers took her to the New Africa House and immediately upon entering, she felt 'home'. As a 16-year old freshman, this meant a lot to her. These spaces were where she found family, sought refuge from everyday stressors and it gave her the support she needed to continue with her studies, from being around faculty members who looked like her, to listening to the kind of music that made her feel like home. We were both reminded of our own personal experiences after visiting cultural centers at Oregon State University (OSU).

Karen Penn de Martinez, Sharon Bland, Elaine Doong, and I visited OSU for a search advocate training. We walked by several cultural centers and decided to visit them and talk to their students. We were able to visit 5 cultural centers at Oregon State University. These visits solidified our belief that cultural centers are critical for our students. At the Asian & Pacific Cultural Center we talked to students that were proud of the art displayed on their walls that represented the Pacific Ocean and the various Asian cultures. At the Lonnie B. Harris Black Cultural Center, one of the peer facilitators talked about her grit in the field of engineering where she had no women of color giving classes but having the safe space of the cultural center to come to and be with other students that were also experiencing similar situations. Student workers from the Centro Cultural Cesar Chavez and the Native American Longhouse showed us a Dia de Los Muertos display for an event that they had co-hosted. At the Ettihad Cultural Center we walked into a conversation with 4 students talking about what they expected their future to hold after graduating. Each of these spaces felt welcoming but most importantly all of the students we met were beyond grateful for having a place where they could talk to their friends, host events, and just be themselves.

And while these spaces we visited were at a primarily white university, we have been told by MC students in the numerous surveys, Pizza For Your Thoughts sessions, through student clubs and organizations, student focus group with the President's Advisory Committee on Equity and Inclusion, that they have been clamoring for these types of spaces as well. Students yearn to find wellness, cultural bonding and a safe space.

The ideal student center would embody equity and inclusion through multicultural art on its walls, multicultural performances in its rooms, and with enough space for diverse groups to meet comfortably to collaborate. There would also be a library with books on social justice and computers with internet access so that students could do research that would enhance their multicultural awareness and expand their knowledge on languages/arts/law or the area that they find interesting. There would be tables and desks but also comfortable places to sit and relax so that courageous conversations could take place. A kitchen and eating area would help the center feel more like home and allow students to partake in cooking with their native spices, and break bread with students from various backgrounds—all sharing

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their love for food, music and story-telling. Lastly, an outdoor area would be set up as part of the center so that students could do performances that continue to bring cultures together. The College community would know where to find spoken-word performances, drum circles, dancing, and more importantly, acceptance and safety.