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## Gathering Space: Building Community

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# Gathering Space, Building Community

Cultural Resource Centers, Portland State University

Gathering Space: Building Community Report 2017  
Cultural Resource Centers, Diversity & Multicultural Student Services  
Portland State University

Gathering Space, Building Community  
Cultural Resource Centers  
Diversity & Multicultural Student Services  
Portland State University  
2017

*Prepared for:*

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## **Introduction**

The Cultural Resource Centers (CRCs) at Portland State University (PSU) create a student-centered inclusive environment that enriches the university experience. The CRCs value diversity, social justice, cultural traditions, student identities, success and leadership. On November 2, 2016, PSU held a grand opening celebrating the expansion of the CRCs with the addition of two new centers, the Pan-African Commons (PAC) and the Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American Student Center (PIAAA). The growth of the CRCs marks a milestone in PSU's commitment to social justice and equity. The Gathering Space, Building Community Report not only documents this growth, but also aims to highlight the depth and breadth of the influence of cultural centers on our campus. Our activities extend well beyond creating space for studying or relaxing. We impact all aspects of retention, persistence, and graduation for our students; create meaningful community connections; and foster authentic environments for coalition building.

Since its inception as Vanport Extension Center (VEC) in 1946, the school now known as Portland State University has provided opportunities to underrepresented communities in higher education. VEC actively encouraged enrollment of nontraditional students including veterans, first-generation college students, and students of color. PSU continues to recognize the unique challenges these students face while achieving academic goals.

Students of color encounter unique barriers in higher education (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Services to support their retention are an important component of a university and cultural spaces represent an example of how an institution can support the co-curricular needs of its students (Ladson-Billings, 2012.) Alexander Astin (1993) found the critical impact college environments have on undergraduate retention when he noted that cultural workshops in cultural centers increased students' feeling of personal empowerment and were connected to increased retention rates. In *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice* (2012), the authors highlighted the existence of cultural centers as

counter spaces, offering students of color safe havens on college campuses that are often rooted in their exclusion. Culturally specific services, community involvement, and resources help students achieve academic success and contribute to higher retention rates. As a co-curricular resource, the Cultural Resource Centers at PSU strive to incorporate student-centered ideologies into their mission. The Cultural Resource Centers recognize those ideologies often pivot on the acknowledgement of students' marginalized identities and unique challenges as scholars in an urban, public institution of higher learning.

## **History**

Conversations concerning privilege and the allocation of resources to establish equity are often fraught with tension. The history surrounding the development of the new cultural centers was no different. Appeals for allocation of these cultural spaces date back decades. One such documented written request dates back to 1998. At that time, a faculty panel chaired by Professor Dalton Miller-Jones, a faculty member in the Black Studies Department, formally recommended to then PSU President Daniel Bernstine the creation of a physical multi-cultural space with the understanding that Black students would feel included and greatly benefit by this addition.

In 2012, the Miller-Jones report was republished in the university's Diversity Action Plan to demonstrate a renewed commitment to campus quality of life issues. Also in 2012, the newly formed student group, Coalition for Asian Pacific American Studies (CAPAS), submitted a written request for the designation of a physical space specifically for Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American (PIAAA) students. This request was co-signed by students, student organizations, and community members and highlighted the importance of designated cultural spaces. Also, the addition of spaces for these communities was included in the Cultural Resource Centers' 5-Year Strategic Plan. Students, faculty, and staff of color repeated these requests in many formats over the years.



## **Students of Color Speak Out**

In 2015, concern and aggravation grew to a point where Portland State University students felt they could no longer express their desire for new cultural centers through usual channels. The deputizing of campus security, despite an overwhelming objection by a group of students, left many on campus angered. This introduction of armed police to campus served as a tipping point of frustration as it came at a time when nationwide police brutality of people of color was frequently in the news. Students of color expressed they were at odds with the interests of campus administration and wanted safe places to gather. In November of 2015, leaders of the Black Student Union created a list of demands, which were shared throughout campus.

Race-based tensions were high on college campuses throughout Oregon. Students at Oregon State University, in order to have their voices heard by administration, hosted a highly successful speak out event. At PSU, the Cultural Resource Centers responded to student requests to hold a similar gathering. The Cultural Resource Centers joined Enrollment Management & Student Affairs and Global Diversity & Inclusion to support students planning the PSU Students of Color Speak Out held on December 1, 2015. Event facilitators collected concerns and demands from PSU community members at the all-day student-centered gathering, held in the Multicultural Student Center. The evening event was an opportunity to present the information to President Wim Wiewel, senior administrators, faculty, and staff.

President Wiewel later described the Speak Out evening as one of the more challenging events of his professional career. During the lengthy event, student after student made demands of President Wiewel, including the demands for two new Cultural Resource Centers. He recognized the need to take action. Shortly following the Speak Out, President Wiewel issued a campus-wide memorandum announcing that two new Cultural Resource Centers would open in fall 2016. Details regarding the name, location, and mission of the new centers were to be determined by

the Cultural Resource Centers Leadership Team. Ultimately, a student-centered process was decided upon. We sought input from students, staff, faculty, and community.

### **Comparison to other Cultural Resource Centers**

At the time of the announcement by President Wiewel, Portland State University had three existing Cultural Resource Centers: the Multicultural Student Center (opened 1993), the Native American Student and Community Center (opened 2003), and La Casa Latina Student Center (opened 2011). The Native American Student and Community Center is located in a stand-alone building while the other centers are located on the second floor of the Smith Memorial Student Union (SMSU). To provide a sense of solidarity and community within the different cultures and encourage intercultural communication, it was determined that the ideal location for the new centers would also be on the second floor of the Smith Memorial Student Union.

Much like the other culturally-specific student centers, the two new centers focus on programming services allowing positive representations of their respective cultures while maintaining an atmosphere in which knowledge is freely shared and accessible to all. The Cultural Resource Centers offer space for those who want to see their identities reflected when seeking help, information, and a sense of community. Both centers embody these ideals and have their own unique look and feel. Students, faculty, and staff work together to create a safe and positive space for everyone who visits.

### **Proposal and Vision**

Before and during construction of the new spaces, Cultural Resource Centers staff gathered regularly with interested students, faculty, staff, and community members to create a common understanding of what people hoped for and expected from the new centers. Below is a condensed version of the results from those gatherings:

## **Vision**

The Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American Student Center and the Pan-African Commons will provide safe, welcoming, and inclusive spaces for students of color to share in the learning experiences of culture and diversity, as well as opportunities to fully integrate and be a part of the campus community.

## **Goals**

### Pan-African Commons (PAC)

- To provide a gathering space on campus that honors African, Black American, and Caribbean identities.
- To provide culturally relevant programming and opportunities for identity and leadership development.
- To connect students with the communities that aim to preserve ancestry and indigenous solidarity among people of African descent.

### Pacific Islander, Asian, & Asian American (PIAAA) Student Center

- To provide a space on campus for our Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American (PIAAA) communities.
- To connect students with faculty and staff who wish to serve and develop student relationships through leadership opportunities, cultural programs, and community engagement.

## **Accommodations**

The list below reflects what students, faculty, staff, and community wish for the new centers:

- Storage
- Computer lab
- Community/Lounge area
- Event/Collaborative space

- Receptions area
- Kitchen space
- Study area
- Office space
- Library area

### **Student-Centered Voice**

Students play an essential and powerful role in the creation of all of the PSU Cultural Resource Centers. The creation of the two new centers is one result of the Students of Color Speak Out. The needs and demands of students who feel marginalized and wish to have culturally specific spaces and resources were heard. The following are some of the reasons expressed by students in favor of establishing the Pan-African Commons and Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American Student Center:

- Students feel their identities are not reflected in areas and positions of leadership, both on campus and in the city of Portland;
- A balance needs to be created on campus (especially in classrooms) where marginalized students are not used as teaching or experiential tools. “I’m not your social experiment;”
- PSU being lauded as the most diverse campus “doesn’t feel good because there aren’t faculty and staff who look like me;”
- Repeated requests for inclusion of Indigenous populations in class and requests being repeatedly ignored even when resources were recommended - feels like erasure. Support provided through NASCC;
- Faculty not trained to work with people who learn differently;
- Sensitive topics bring up racist thoughts from peers - faculty and mentors don’t actively participate in the discussion. Faculty do not know truth of marginalized communities; and
- Professors are not trained or knowledgeable about how to interrupt racist and other harmful ideas presented in class conversation and curriculum.

Students expressed feeling a desperate need to have a safe space where they could converse and connect with others going through similar daily experiences. For students, the centers represent a “home away from home” where they can decompress and worry less about the negative forces and racial injustice experienced in the outside world. Students expressed need for spaces where they could seek out resources without feeling afraid or embarrassed about seeking help. Further, they wanted spaces where they could see themselves reflected in people who staff the centers.

### **New Physical Spaces**

Construction of the new centers began in June 2016 and concluded in October of the same year. New and returning students were pleasantly surprised to see the physical spaces come to fruition. Located in adjoining rooms at 1825 SW Broadway, Smith Memorial Student Union 235 and 236, the new centers offer the following accommodations:

#### **Pacific Islander, Asian, & Asian American Student Center (SMSU 235)**

- Study/Lounge area: 572 sq. ft.
- Computer station: 151.25 sq. ft.
- Reception area: 20 sq. ft.
- Kitchenette area: 20 sq. ft.
- Total area space: 833 sq. ft.

#### **Pan-African Commons (SMSU 236)**

- Study/Lounge area: 575 sq. ft.
- Computer station: 117 sq. ft.
- Reception area: 20 sq. ft.
- Total area space: 879 sq. ft.

## **Mission Statements**

Pan-African Commons - The Pan-African Commons cultivates cultural, personal, academic, and professional development and opportunities through programming and resources that foster empowerment, enrichment, and principled solidarity that advocates for liberation among peoples of the African diaspora. All students are welcome.

Pacific Islander, Asian, & Asian American Student Center - The Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American (PIAAA) Student Center at Portland State University offers an engaging and accepting space to address the diverse and changing needs of our Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American student communities. The PIAAA Student Center strengthens the identity of Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American students through accessible programming, intercultural community building, and social justice education. All students are welcome.

## **Timeline**

December 1, 2015 - Students of Color Speak Out

December 7, 2015 - President Wiewel announces the planned formation of two new Cultural Resource Centers by the following fall term.

Week of April 20th, 2016 - Backwards timeline created for the naming process. Poster boards placed in Student Activities & Leadership Programs (SALP) mezzanine, Diversity & Multicultural Student Services (DMSS) computer lab, School of Gender, Race, and Nation (Parkmill, formerly XSB building), and the Multicultural Student Center (MCC) bulletin board.

April 27th, 2016 – A call for names posted on all Cultural Resource Centers (CRC) Facebook pages and in the weekly CRC newsletter email.

May 1st, 2016 - Call for names announced in Virtual Viking (weekly student newsletter).

May 1st, 2016 - CRC website updated with call for names.

May 5th, 2016 – At Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Culture Night, a poster board with name suggestions highlighted at event.

May 9th, 2016 – After a list of names is collected, a Google form is created for voting.

May 11th, 2016 - Google forms with collected names are posted and pinned to all CRC Facebook pages.

May 18th, 2016 – Google forms are once again, posted and pinned to all CRC Facebook pages.

May 21st, 2016 - CRC website updated with link to voting form for all names.

May 23rd, 2016 - Google form for all names closes. Top three names are selected and a final Google form for each of the centers is created.

May 23rd, 2016 - CRC website updated with top three names.

May 24th, 2016 - CRC website updated with link to Google form vote on final names.

May 24th, 2016 - Emails to relevant student groups and academic departments is sent asking stakeholders to pass along the final Google form to their students.

May 24th, 2016 - Final Google form posted and pinned to top of all CRC Facebook pages.

May 25th, 2016 - Final Google form is featured on the weekly CRC newsletter email.

May 27th, 2016 - Based on feedback from Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American community added a fourth name option to the Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander (A/AA/PI) Student Center final Google form. The new form is set up and an email is sent to everyone who filled out previous name choice form. The new form is posted to all CRC Facebook pages and added to the CRC website.

June 10th, 2016 - The Cultural Resource Centers hosts a final naming session.

July 1st, 2016 – An A/AA/PI Open Forum is held to discuss the choice of the name Heart of Asian American, Asian, Pacific Islander Student Center.

Week of September, 7th, 2016 – A/AA/PI Center hosts gathering with faculty, staff, and community.

Week of October 3rd, 2016- Committees of students, faculty, staff, and community began to identify the A/AA/PI and African, African American, and Black (A/AA/B) center mission statements.

October 5th, 2016 - A/AA/PI & A/AA/B centers host a gathering space.

October 12th, 2016 - A/AA/PI & A/AA/B centers host a naming workshop.

October 17th, 2016 - Final naming workshop for new centers. The new centers were named the Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American (PIAAA) Student Center & the Pan-African Commons (PAC).

October 28th, 2016 - Mission statements for the PAC & PIAAA Student Center are finalized

November 2nd, 2016 - New CRCs Grand Opening Celebration

## **Addenda**

[Supplemental Materials](#)

[Gathering Space, Building Community Website](#)

[PSU Students of Color Speak Out Memo and Notes](#)

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