Students' Perceptions of Ethnic and Multicultural Centers

Kenneth A Reid[*1]; Stanley S Ebede[2]

[1] Minnesota State University, USA

[2] University of Northern Iowa, USA
Email: kenneth.Reid@mnsu.edu

Abstract

Cultural centers are historically known for successfully serving the greater responsibility of supporting minority students and sharing their culture, traditions, and values with the larger campus community. Despite their previous successes, recent research suggests that culture centers are now losing their effectiveness and are no longer resonating with students. Furthermore, there has not been any research to examine the state of general ethnic and multi- cultural centers since their evolution in the late '90s. Nor, has anyone published research that analyzes students' perceptions towards helping identify recommendations for cultural center success. This preliminary research study examines students' perceptions of ethnic and multicultural centers at predominantly white institutions. This study will specifically evaluate students' beliefs on the purpose, impact, and future of cultural centers at predominantly white institutions with a minority population of seventeen percent or less. Using a mixed method approach, student responses were analyzed and also resulted in themes that coincide with the initial purpose of cultural centers back in the late 1960s. This research study suggests that students do understand the purpose of cultural centers and there is a need to investigate the disconnection between students' perceptions of cultural center and the actual implications of these same centers.

Keywords: Multicultural; Students; Ethnic; Centers; Perceptions

Introduction

Many predominantly white institutions are having problems recruiting, retaining and supporting multicultural student populations on their campuses, more specifically ethnic groups. According to Sedlacek (1999), this was a problem back in the late 1960s that was resolved with the implementation of black cultural centers. However, as time has elapsed, these centers have been stretched to accommodate more and more group, resulting in being less effective. As a result, administrators at PWIs no longer hold these centers to the high esteem as has been done previously. Instead, administrators are scrutinizing these centers, losing faith in the abilities, and questioning their purpose. Over time, political funding cuts, reduced staffing, and a lack of administrative support has led to the demise of cultural centers at PWIs.

Research has expounded on the current state of cultural centers in higher education across the United States. Patton (2006b) evaluated and assessed students' perceptions of black cultural centers through qualitative studies and also indicated the common misconceptions, challenges, and benefits of

black cultural centers. During the Civil Rights Movement, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Higher Education Act of 1965. It was intended to "keeping the doors to higher education open for all academically qualified students regardless of their financial circumstances" (Cervantes., 2005, p. 2). By the late 1960s, it had succeeded in accomplishing its purpose. Postsecondary institutions throughout the United States saw a change in its admissions. Large amounts of African American students were applying and enrolling into colleges and universities like never before in the history of higher education.

Administrators at predominantly white institutions (PWI) were not prepared for this shift in their student demographics, nor were they prepared to address the issues and challenges that followed. Bigotry and ignorance started to dominating campuses. Soon, African American students experienced discrimination, isolation, and racism. College and universities were not equipped to handle these issues, and lacked resources to help support these students. Over time, colleges and universities decided to address the issue by hiring more diverse faculty, recruiting more diverse students, developing diverse ethnic academic programs, and establishing Black Culture Centers (Patton., 2006a).

Black Culture Centers (BCC) were considered to be very successful at recruiting, retaining and supporting African American students. They were so successful that other minority groups demanded their own facilities to help support them. Soon, colleges and universities developed ethnic cultural centers, which catered to the needs of one specific ethnicity, and multicultural center, which were all encompassing offices that catered to both ethnic and social cultures. These centers were successfully serving the greater responsibility of sharing culture, traditions, and values of these groups with the larger campus community. However, despite their previous successes, recent research suggests that culture centers are now losing their effectiveness. Researchers suggest that culture centers are not resonating with students, no longer serving their purpose, and becoming obsolete at PWIs.

The Virtues of Black Cultural Centers

Black cultural centers date back to the early 1900s, according to some, when small groups of African Americans, or Blacks as referred to in most of the literature, were selected to attend predominantly white institutions. It is believed they developed their own safe havens where they came together on a regular basis to student, network and support one another. However, most research recognizes the fruitfulness of cultural centers around the late 1960s, during the civil rights movement (Hefner., 2002). It was then that President Johnson signed the Higher Education Act of 1965, which intended to "[keep] the doors to higher education open for all academically qualified students regardless of their financial circumstances" (Astin., 2004, p. 332). It later resulted in an increase of African American enrollment at predominantly white institutions. Predominantly white institutions were not prepared or equipped to deal with the increasingly large black student population. African American students experienced a lack of academic, social and student development support from faculty and staff. There was also insufficient resources to help educate the majority towards being more culturally competent. This led to increased discrimination on many college campuses. According to Patton (2006a), lack of resources and support have resulted in students seeking avenues that enhance their experience as well as counterbalance any forms of discrimination and isolation. These result to campus officials being pressurized to implement changes.

Black cultural centers were instrumental to the success of African American students at that time. According to David Hefner, if you were to "ask most anyone on a college campus about the value of cultural centers…most will quickly tout a number of virtues" (2002). Programming by Black cultural centers were instrumental in acclimating first-year students by teaching them skills such as, public speaking, planning, teamwork, and event promotions. Students also developed leadership through Black cultural centers' student ambassador opportunities. It was because of BCCs that African American

students had a heightened sense of their black identity. This was because they were taught about their culture, the historical presence of Blacks on campus and the purpose of cultural centers. Overall, it was a proud symbol of black history that equated to "Black Power" for many African American students (Patton., 2006a).

Evolution of Cultural Centers

According to Donald R. Deskins, African American enrollment grew from 800,000 to nearly 1 million, Hispanic American enrollment increased from 200,000 to 400,000, Asian American attendance was up to 300,000 from 100,000, and the Native American population increased from 52,000 to 72,000 between the 1970s to the '80s (Deskins., 1991, p. 20). As a result of the increased enrollment of these ethnic group, "multiculturalism began to take form" (Hefner., 2002). Soon Latino, Asian, and other ethnic and social cultures demanded that administration adhere to their needs of support. Since Black cultural centers were so successful, administrators at predominantly white institutions began looking into ways to provide the same support and resources to these new diverse, minority groups. "Universities, like Rutgers University in New Jersey and Indiana University in Bloomington, created separate centers for these emerging new ethnic groups, a model that many directors embrace" (Hefner., 2002). However, many revisited the mission of Black cultural centers and most created multicultural centers.

Cultural Centers' Criticisms and Issues

In 2002, David Hefner reported that cultural centers were "standing on shaky ground" and "under attack" as a result of "good old-fashion competition" (Hefner., 2002). As time progressed, cultural centers began deterring from their historical path, and eventually the universal purpose of black cultural centers was derailed, resulting in cultural centers having a variety of focuses. Hefner (2002) posits that black cultural centers have different objectives. Some serves as sponsorship for programs; others focus on the academic success of students, while some are heavily research-oriented or combination of all of the above.

Meanwhile, multicultural centers aren't considered impactful for it is believed that they were developed as symbolic means to making a university seem diverse for recruitment (Prince., 1994). In addition, many believe that multicultural centers are not effective because they do not resonate with one ethnic group, as a result of trying to accommodate so many groups. Over time, students, faculty and administrators began questioning the relevance of cultural centers. This lead to a lack of support and funding for cultural centers from university administrators that inevitably resulted in the demise of cultural centers.

Methodology

This research study used a mixed method approach and it is intended to help dispel those notions similar to Patton (2006b). However, this study will examine students' perceptions of the purpose, effectiveness, and future of both ethnic- and social-cultural centers at predominantly white institutions. The participants of this study were 54 undergraduate and graduate students of different ethnicities at predominantly white institutions with a minority population of seventeen percent or less. All 54 respondents qualified to take the survey indicated that they attended a predominantly white institution that had a minority population under 18%. However, the vast majority of the respondents indicated that they had multi-cultural centers, which was 83%. The remaining 17% indicated that they had an ethnic specific cultural center that served only one ethnic group.

All of the participants self-identified whether they attended a predominantly white institution and whether there was a cultural center on their campus through preliminary questions. The study was designed to answer the following question: How do students' perceive the purpose, impact, and future of cultural centers at PWIs? Students' perceptions of cultural centers were assessed using a questionnaire administered through Qualtrics. In addition, the questionnaire was designed to evaluate students' perceptions of cultural centers purpose, impact, and future. The survey was then distributed along with a call to action letter to several associations including: 1) National Association of Student Personnel Administrators; 2) National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Region IV; 3) Association of Black Culture Centers, and 4) The Housing and Residence Life Network. Reponses were analyzed for trends and themes, and then used to identify student's needs from culture centers at PWIs. The needs will be used in future studies to help determine recommendations for PWIs to again support minority students as the literature review suggests it had done previously.

Results and Discussion

Students' responses were analyzed using the mixed method approach. Their responses resulted in themes that coincide with the initial purpose of cultural centers back in the late 1960s (Sedlacek., 1999). Four major themes were identified in this study: a) educate, promote and support; b) inclusion and not exclusion; c) increased participation; d) reformation, restructuring and needs for funds. Table 1 outlines the major themes as it relates to each research question. On the other hand, Table 2 provides a detailed thematic analysis of participants' responses.

Table 1 Major Themes

Research Questions *Qualitative*	Major Themes
What do you think is the purpose of ethnic or multicultural centers on college campuses?	Educate, promote and support
Who do you believe ethnic or multicultural center's programs serve?	Inclusion and not exclusion
How your ethnic or multicultural center has impacted your campus climate?	Educate, promote and support Inclusion and not exclusion
How has the cultural center affected or impacted you as a student?	Educate, promote and support Inclusion and not exclusion
How do you feel about the future of ethnic or multicultural centers?	Reformation, restructuring and needs for funds.

Individuals' responses were open ended and several themes were identified in their responses. As a result, many responses were labeled with one or more themes, thus resulting in more theme totals than responses. Information from the qualitative responses and the descriptive data were compared to see if

there were any trends. Results were then separated and analyzed into 3 labels: purpose, impact, and future status. In addition, the open-ended questions resulted to identifying some questions with more than one purpose and was given multiple labels.

Table 2 Thematic analysis of participants' responses

Research Questions *Qualitative*	Thematic Analysis of Participants' Responses
What do you think is the purpose of ethnic- or multi- cultural centers on college campuses?	Educate the majority, promote diversity, support minorities, and provide safe zones.
Who do you believe ethnic- or multi- cultural center's programs serve?	All students, multicultural students (including LGBT), ethnic minority students, campus administrators, and everyone (including staff, students, community members and administrators) aw.
How has your ethnic or multicultural center impacted your campus climate?	Creating awareness by educating the majority and exposing individuals to other cultures; provided an environment to learn about other by promoting and encouraging diversity; allowed students to network; provided a safe and welcoming environment; and has not impacted the campus climate.
How has the cultural center affected or impacted you as a student?	Provided an environment for students to learn about others and promote diversity; cultural center was a safe zone that made students feel welcomed; opened students' eyes to new cultures; and provided students with networking opportunities.
How do you feel about the future of ethnic- or multi- cultural centers?	Optimistic future at PWIs, better marketing, needs reformation or restructuring, hope that they become a more crucial entity, a more clear purpose, there needs to be a broader title, will continue to be undermined, concerned about their funding, they are not needed, need for collaboration, and other.

Purpose

The first section of the questionnaire explored students' perceptions of the purpose of their campus' cultural center. Forty eight percent (48%) of the responses provided indicated that students perceived the purpose of cultural centers were to support minority students. It was followed closely behind with forty-four percent (44%) of responses indicating that students believed cultural centers were safe zones for students who were not of the majority population. Students also wrote that cultural centers are to promote diversity on college campuses. This sentiment was noted in forty percent (40%) of the forty-five (45) responses. However, only twenty percent (20%) of the responses provided mentioned anything about educating the majority about other cultures. When the students were asked, who do you

believe the programs of ethnic or multicultural centers are meant to serve?, thirty-seven percent (37%) of the respondents wrote that they believed cultural centers were meant for everyone; twenty-seven percent (27%) of the respondents believe cultural centers are meant for ethnic minority students; and twenty percent (20%) indicated that they are meant for students. Lastly, the combined ten percent (10%) of the respondents suggested that cultural centers are specifically for campus administrators or multicultural students.

Impact

The second set of questions in the study surveyed students perceptions of their cultural center's impact. Multiple impacts were identified in several responses. The results showed that thirty-nine percent (39%) of the participants reported that their campus' cultural center had not impacted the campus. While the second leading percentage thirty percent (30%) indicated they believed their cultural center has impacted their campus by promoting and/or encouraging diversity. The remaining responses were all below twenty percent (20%). Both educating majority and supporting the minority received support from eighteen percent (18%) of the responses. On the other hand, eleven percent (11%) of the respondents noted that cultural centers have impacted their campus by providing a welcoming safe zone for their students.

Furthermore, students were asked to rate the impact of their campus' cultural center from when they first attended the institution. Fifty-one students provided rated the impact and eleven students opted to answer the follow-up questions about why they did or did not feel that their cultural center had impacted the campus. Their responses were that the center has improved as a result of more/ better programming, increased participation, and better marketing. However, two individuals felt their center had gotten worse because of a lack of funding and making the majority feel unwelcomed. The questionnaire further asked students to evaluate their cultural center's impact on them as a student. Unfortunately, only 24 individuals responded. A summary of their understandings of cultural centers' purposes can best be explained in one of the participant's response:

> *The purpose of having ethnic or multi-cultural centers is for students of non-white decent to be able to receive services, have people they can go to for help, have connections, know that there are people with similar situations, etc. It's like a second home to people on campus. It is a place that includes people of different cultures that have been underrepresented and welcome/support them. It is a place that appreciates the diversity.*

The identified themes and their percentages follow: twenty percent (20%) believed their cultural center provided an environment for them to learn about others and promote diversity; sixteen percent (16%) indicated the cultural center was a safe zone made them feel welcomed; twelve percent (12%) mentioned that the cultural centered opened their eyes to new cultures; and, eight percent (8%) thought they were provided with networking opportunities as a result of their cultural center.

Relevance Today and in the Future

The research study concluded with questions relating to the relevancy of cultural centers both today and in the future. Participants were first asked whether they believed cultural centers were needed today. Out of the 51 individuals who responded positively, only 43 individuals expounded on why they felt cultural centers were needed. The identified themes and their percentages follow: forty-one percent (41%) felt that cultural centers are needed today to help increase awareness about other cultures; twenty-seven (27%) thought cultural centers are essential to supporting minority students; twenty-five percent

(25%) indicated that cultural centers are needed to promote diversity and inclusion; twenty-three (23%) wrote that cultural centers provides safe zones to students who may not feel welcomed by the majority; and, a combined seven (7%) felt that cultural centers are meant for educating the majority and networking.

Finally, students were asked about their thoughts on the future of cultural centers at predominantly white institutions. Students reported that ethnic and multicultural centers are needed but are concerned about a number of factors, including: 1) a need for better marketing; reformation and restructuring; 2) there needs to be a better understanding of their purpose; 3) development of broader titles for the names; 4) administration at some institutions will continue to undermine them; and 5) the feeling that these centers could do a better job of collaborating with other offices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research suggests that students do understand the purpose of cultural centers. These findings support the literature that cultural centers provide supports, creates awareness and networking opportunities for students (Cuvjet., 1997 & Hefner., 2002). It is evident that, despite the formal education on cultural centers, these centers still symbolize something to all groups on campus. Students also have a clear understanding on the impact of cultural centers both in their academic communities and personal lives. This is interesting because several students indicated that they had not visited the center during their academic term. Moreover, it is interested because several students felt that their cultural center had not made an impact, yet they understood overall purpose. As previously mentioned, this information need to be further evaluated by future research that investigates the disconnection between students' perceptions of cultural center and the actual implications of these same centers. Furthermore, this information is crucial in the development of recommendations towards the success of cultural centers.

Cuvjet (1997) suggested that it is crucial for minority male students to feel a sense of belonging and support for them to be successful. Thus, it would be advantageous of us, as student affairs professionals, to invest in programs, initiatives, and centers that are already in existence, rather than disregarding them and cutting their budgets. University officials must reinvest their energy into these centers and redirect their time towards supporting them. If administration fails to do this, then PWIs will continue to see the doors revolve with students leaving left and right. Furthermore, administrators must take the lead in supporting these entities by displaying their support to the greater community. It is only then will the entire college community see the importance of these centers and consider what resources and support they offer.

This study is intended to expound on Patton's (2006) qualitative examination of students perceptions of black culture centers by evaluating all students' perceptions of cultural centers. As previously mentioned, there has not been any research to examine the state of general ethnic and multi-cultural centers since their evolution in the late '90s. Nor, has anyone published research that analyzes students' perceptions towards helping identify recommendations for cultural center success. This would be beneficial to administrators, cultural center directors, and the future of multicultural groups, as reports predict that minority enrollment will outnumber majority enrollment in the near future (Manzo., 2000). Information will be gathered on their current understanding of culture center's purpose, impact and future impact. In addition, the findings of this study will be crucial in the development of recommendations for cultural centers success.

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