

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

DAILY BRUIN

Ethnic studies centers celebrate 50 years, look forward to continuing their work

By Maya Mcnealis, January 30, 2019



The Institute of American Cultures is the umbrella organization that encompasses the American Indian Studies Center, Asian American Studies Center, Chicano Studies Research Center and Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies. All four centers are celebrating 50 years of activism and promotion of diversity and inclusion. (Courtesy of UCLA Newsroom)

UCLA's four ethnic studies centers reflected on the progress they've made toward promoting diversity and inclusivity since their creation 50 years ago.

Since their establishment in the 1960s, the American Indian Studies Center, Asian American Studies Center, Chicano Studies Research Center and Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies have funded research at the undergraduate, graduate, faculty and community levels with the aim of diversifying the UCLA campus and promoting the inclusion and protection of minority groups.

Chon Noriega, a professor in the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television and director of the CSRC, said he believes the centers have been able to have an impact through their applied research.

“In the traditional sense, a university is focused on basic research – asking questions and pursuing an answer regardless of whether it has an impact or not,” he said. “The creation of these centers was an extraordinarily innovative and necessary thing, because we are using them to address real-world issues with concrete impacts.”

Shannon Speed, the director of the AISC, said she is excited about how ethnic studies research has become increasingly interdisciplinary, which has led fields such as disability studies, literary theory and history to adopt theories from ethnic studies.

“American Indian studies was a fairly insular discipline, but the theoretical insights in the last decade and a half have begun to be applied to other disciplines, which is amazing,” she said.

Speed, who is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, said she is passionate about the AISC’s ongoing project to document hate crime incidents in LA. The AISC started the project in response to a rise in hate crimes after the 2016 presidential election.

“Ethnic studies centers have a unique responsibility to respond in political moments when intolerance and hate speech and acts are being fomented by the current leadership,” she said.

Noriega said Latino and Chicano students deserve most of the credit for the founding of the CSRC, since there were very few Latino and Chicano faculty at the university in the 1960s. Noriega, who has been the director of the CSRC since 2002, said students have progressively developed a more positive attitude toward ethnic studies, which makes him feel optimistic about the future of the field.

“Students as a cohort tend to think about their education as both personal enrichment and something that they can take back to the community,” he said.

Noriega said he thinks it is important for students to retain this perspective on education because many people today are increasingly viewing education as simply a means to obtain a lucrative career.

"Surveys of undergraduates show that folks from groups that traditionally have not had access to education carry a sense of responsibility that they have to bring their knowledge and opportunity back to their community to make things better," he said.

Noriega added the centers have faced significant backlash throughout the years. In 2003, Noriega said the CSRC received hate mail and the chancellor's office received threats after the center published a report humanizing noncitizen immigrants and arguing that they ought to be afforded local voting rights.

"Because of things like this, in different ways, we've had a sustained sense of urgency in our work from the beginning," he said.

Jerry Kang, the vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, said in an email statement he thinks the Institute of American Cultures has created significant impact by leveraging UCLA's brand to create programs like the Bruin Excellence & Student Transformation Grant and to co-sponsor events for the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. The IAC is the umbrella organization that encompasses the American Indian, Asian American, Chicano and African American ethnic studies centers.

Kang said the reason he joined UCLA as a faculty member was because of initial outreach from the AASC in 1994.

Noriega said he thinks the ethnic studies centers must continue to find a way to increase diversity and representation without marginalizing other ethnic communities.

"Each ethnic studies center has been defending turf that's based on our own group's marginalization, but we need to move into the bigger arena and in the process not exclude other groups," he said. "It comes down to intersectionality – how do we talk about difference as a set of relationships, not as a hierarchy?"