Collaboration for Cultural Programming: Engaging Culture Centers, Multicultural Affairs, and Student Activities Offices as Partners

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Collaboration for Cultural Programming: Engaging Culture Centers, Multicultural Affairs, and Student Activities Offices as Partners

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Promoting diversity and multiculturalism on college and university campuses is a challenging yet attainable goal that can be met through collaborative efforts among students, faculty, and staff. Offices within student affairs—multicultural programs, student activities, and residence life—play a significant role in facilitating the educational, out-of-class experiences of college students. Ensuring that students learn to communicate and interact across racial and cultural boundaries is important in enhancing these experiences and promoting student engagement. Student affairs educators must create cross-cultural learning experiences for students and encourage them to move beyond their spaces of comfort. Various offices on campus can collaborate, pooling resources to offer programs and services that cater to the needs of a diverse student body, while also creating a welcoming environment that embraces diversity and multiculturalism.

A major challenge in creating these cross-departmental collaborations is the unspoken and often unchallenged assumption that multicultural affairs offices or centers should bear the brunt of the responsibility for cultural education and programming. While such offices certainly have staff who are trained and skilled in
this functional area, the responsibility of creating cross-cultural learning opportunities should be a collaborative one with various campus entities engaged in meaningful partnerships. Shuford and Palmer (2004) contend that multicultural affairs professionals should work with allies throughout campus to ensure that diversity is woven into the fabric of the institution—including policies, human resources, programming, and curricula. This chapter describes how collaboration between multicultural affairs/culture centers (MACCs) and the student activities office (SAO) can advance institutional goals for cross-learning and multiculturalism. We chose SAOs because of their programming function and emphasis on out-of-class student engagement. Certainly, there are collaborative possibilities for MACCs and other offices/departments in student affairs and academic affairs. But for the sake of focus, we concentrate solely on SAOs.

This chapter provides both rationale and encouragement for enhanced relationships between SAOs and MACCs to help create an atmosphere that embraces and celebrates different cultures and students from various backgrounds. In this discussion, MACC refers to an administrative office or space that focuses on supporting and integrating target populations. Through programming, advisement, leadership development, and other forms of student involvement, MACCs support students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and those who have been historically disenfranchised, including women as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Several colleges have established women’s centers, international student centers, and culture centers for racially underrepresented populations. Such facilities allow students who share common histories, cultures, customs, and challenges to support each other in an environment designed to meet their specific needs. These centers can also promote cross-cultural interactions among students.

This chapter provides a clearer understanding of MACCs and how their collaboration with other campus entities, particularly SAOs, could enhance college experiences for multicultural and ethnic students through educational and social programming. We first explore factors that contributed to the establishment of MACCs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and how these factors have influenced missions and operating philosophies. We interpret the current mission and values espoused by MACCs, and explore barriers that hinder collaboration between SAOs and MACCs. Finally, we offer programmatic ideas for SAO and MACC collaboration.
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE CENTERS
AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS

To effectively discuss the collaboration between SAOs and MACCs, we must understand the historical context in which they were established, as well as the role students played in seeking greater societal and educational equality. Shuford and Palmer (2004) and Patton (2005) contend that many minority affairs offices were established when large numbers of students of color, primarily African American students, were allowed mass admission into PWIs in the 1960s. Several pivotal moments in history precipitated this.

MACCs can trace their roots primarily to two periods: the Civil Rights Movement (mid-1950s to early 1970s) and the Multicultural Movement in higher education (early 1970s to present). The Civil Rights Movement illustrated the extent to which the United States confronted challenges to its social and philosophical paradigm of segregation and inequality, including educational policy. Examples of the struggle to embrace a more progressive social paradigm were demonstrated through the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision; the March on Washington (1963); the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), and Martin Luther King Jr. (1968); and the Vietnam War (1959–1975). These events manifested themselves on college campuses the same way they did in the broader American population, through sit-ins, marches, protests, hunger strikes, and other forms of civil disobedience. These events, combined with a more liberal approach to higher education, gave birth to the Multicultural Movement in higher education, discussed later.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND BLACK STUDENT MOVEMENTS

In the late 1950s, college students began to play a critical role in the Civil Rights Movement. The sit-in at Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, may be the most notable demonstration because it brought public attention to Black student involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Students also formed activist organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). By the mid-1960s, amid continuing societal unrest, Black student involvement in the Civil Rights Movement began to dissipate; students were influenced by the Black Panther Party and newly elected SNCC leader, Stokely Carmichael, who espoused the idea of “Black Power” (Patton, 2005; 2006a). The
focus moved from the larger society onto the college campus where student unrest was steadily rising. Federal legislation gave Black students greater access to PWIs, and their numbers increased significantly.

Despite the swelling Black enrollment at these institutions, campus administrators had done very little to prepare for the arrival of these students. African American students were expected to assimilate into the White racial fabric of PWIs and accept the existing institutional culture—a culture plagued by racism, oppression, and discrimination. Unwilling to assimilate or forfeit their own cultural values and identity, African American students and their allies began to protest and conduct sit-ins, demanding that PWIs hire more African American faculty, admit more African American students, include African American topical areas in the curriculum, and provide offices and facilities where they could meet and commune in a safe, nonhostile environment (Patton, 2005).

Patton (2004) noted, “Following their entrance into PWIs, which were not prepared to meet their needs, Black students galvanized to have their voices heard and their presence recognized” (p. 22). Their goal was to make universities more relevant to Black students and the larger Black community. By the late 1960s, several colleges and universities acquiesced to Black student demands and established minority affairs offices and Black culture centers. Young (1991) wrote: “The first Black cultural centers were viewed by students and staff as safe havens in an alien environment . . . minority centers were viewed as a necessary and just alternative to this environment” (p. 18). The efforts of Black students and their supporters were pivotal in the creation of Black culture centers and minority affairs offices at PWIs. By the early to mid-1970s, ethnic culture centers for Latino and Asian students were established, stemming from similar protests and requests from students. Culture centers and multicultural affairs offices on many campuses handled multiple functions and in some ways resembled a “mini student affairs division” by recruiting, overseeing precollege enrichment programs, advising, and planning social or educational programs (Shuford & Palmer, 2004).

**Multicultural Movement**

Around the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Multicultural Movement began to surface in higher education. It became abundantly clear during this movement that diversity and multiculturalism were values that should be reflected in higher education. This period was marked by a commitment from the federal govern-
ment and university leadership to increase the successful enrollment, matriculation, and graduation of racial minorities to be at least congruent with the racial minority population in the United States. Policy initiatives such as the Higher Education Act of 1965 helped increase racial minority enrollment by 56% between 1971 and 1981 (Office of Minority Concerns, 1985).

Another important indicator of the Multicultural Movement was the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life’s publication of One Third of a Nation (1988). The commission’s report documented the American Council on Education’s (ACE) estimates of the rising racial minority populations. It also documents the federal government’s concern about minority populations’ full participation in American life, including postsecondary educational opportunities. The report challenged American educational leaders to renew and strengthen efforts toward recruitment, retention, and graduation of racial minority students. Among the report’s recommendations were creating an academic atmosphere that nourishes minority students, creating a campus culture that values the diversity minority students bring to campus life, and enhancing the academic curriculum to reflect the experiences of non-European cultures (Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, 1988).

One result of the Multicultural Movement was the establishment of African/Black Studies academic programs at PWIs. Ethnic and gender studies programs also began to emerge. The curriculum was expanded to reflect a more interdisciplinary perspective in course offerings, research, and scholarship. Some colleges even added multicultural courses to their graduation requirements for all students. The impact could be seen in more than the curriculum; what is recognized today as the office of multicultural affairs was established. Some Black culture centers and other dedicated ethnic support facilities remained intact, while other institutions collapsed their culture centers and minority affairs offices into multicultural affairs offices or multicultural centers. In some cases, college and university administrators were demonstrating their desire to connect with the larger campus community. Their actions were viewed as an attempt to become politically correct. Much of the progress of the Multicultural Movement has been (and still is) challenged and thwarted by opponents of diversity.

Opponents argued that colleges and universities were simply appeasing groups who considered themselves to be victims of oppression; doing so, they said, lowered standards and created double-standards that were crippling students,
under the guise of diversity. Such opposition was disguised as a politically 
correct effort toward diversity issues; no true commitment or belief in the value 
of diversity and multiculturalism existed underneath. Patton (2006b) also high-
lighted the misconceptions that often plague race-specific support services, such 
as perceptions of self-segregation, erroneous assumptions that such services are 
grounded only toward one particular group, and the flawed notion that these offices 
or centers only serve a social mission. She challenged these ideas and asserted 
that MACCs (Black culture centers in particular) validated students’ experiences, 
served as a springboard for their involvement in larger campus activities, created a 
sense of community, and facilitated identity development. Despite the challenges 
and backlash against diversity and multiculturalism, MACCs still provided a great 
deal of service to racially underrepresented students and their outreach extended 
to the broader campus community (Shuford & Palmer, 2004). Also, offices and 
services geared toward women, GLBT students, and other populations were estab-
lished, expanding the definition of campus diversity and multiculturalism.

Culture Center Missions and Operating Philosophies

To date, no published work documents the first culture center or minority/ 
multicultural affairs office. Young (1991) stated the earliest culture centers can 
be traced specifically from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, and several of these 
still exist today. The Institute of Black Culture at the University of Florida was 
founded in 1972; the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Penn State University and 
the J. D. O’Bryant African-American Institute at Northeastern University were 
founded in 1969; and the University of Maryland, College Park’s Nyumburu 
House was established in 1971. While culture centers and minority affairs offices 
continue to exist, they have at times been criticized as promoting separatism on 
campus. Patton (2004) asserted that a clearer understanding of these centers 
might lend some clarification to their actual programs, student uplift, and their 
misions. Most MACCs have mission statements that include a directive to 
provide opportunities for experiencing and learning about the value of racial/ 
ethnic diversity on their respective campuses. Na’im Akbar (1993) articulated 
four functions of the culture center:
1. The culture center must contribute to identity development and validation.

2. The culture center must provide programs and services that encourage the broader university community to increase its knowledge of ethnic identity.

3. The culture center must be student-centered and serve as an advocate for students.

4. The culture center, through programs and services, must bridge the gap between disciplines and administrative areas by encouraging collaboration.

Similarly, Shuford and Palmer (2004) offer the following mission of minority/multicultural affairs offices:

1. The office should provide support to underrepresented ethnic groups.

2. The office should provide multicultural education for all students.

3. The office should promote systemic change that fosters a multicultural perspective across the campus.

As one might interpret, these functions could very easily be found within the missions of many college unions and student activities offices. As a result, the culture center and multicultural affairs office are typically found within the student affairs division.

**Understanding How Location and Operational Philosophies Affect the Larger Campus Perception of Multicultural Affairs and Culture Centers**

Young (1991) has discussed how the MACC and its location, structure, and operating philosophy contribute to its perception by the broader campus community. Young (1991) recommends that under ideal circumstances the MACC should be located in a freestanding, highly visible facility close to the center of campus. Though this may be the ideal, student life administrators recognize
that promoting diversity has not always been perceived as an important institutional value. The MACCs on some campuses are still functioning in their original facilities, having undergone little or no major renovation, and in some cases, far from the daily traffic of campus. The perception of the MACC as separatist and unwelcoming is heightened by this isolation from the mainstream of campus life. Young (1991) categorized the operating philosophy of MACCs into two distinct approaches that also can have an impact on campus perception: the fortress philosophy and the oasis philosophy.

The fortress approach argues that students from racially underrepresented populations use the MACC as a safe haven. It suggests that allowing perceived outsiders to infiltrate the MACC dilutes its authenticity (Hannon, 2001). For example, continued use of a Black culture center by White students could impact the number of Black students who use the facility; they may not feel comfortable with White students in a space they perceive and believe is designated specifically for Black students. Young (1991) wrote:

\[\ldots\] the cultural center is a safe haven for students who, feeling \ldots under attack adopt the *laager* mentality \ldots If the \ldots others \ldots are allowed in, they will take everything \ldots In the safe haven model, every effort is made to preserve the self-perceived purity of the culture. (p. 52)

In the second philosophy, the MACC operates as an oasis. The MACC welcomes anyone who wants to participate in what it has to offer. The facility is “shared willingly with everyone and the property of all who seek [it] out . . . the ethnic minority center is viewed as a place of relief from the surrounding sameness . . . where cultures meet, exchange, interact, and then emerge renewed . . . made stronger by the sharing” (Young, 1991, p. 52).

Under ideal circumstances, the MACC should operate under the oasis model, but given the ever-changing climate of campuses, it may use elements of either approach at different times. The adaptability of the MACC to meet different students’ needs once again makes it an ideal department for collaborative efforts with other campus entities. The MACC can also serve as a supplementary resource in the student academic and social experience, for example by providing advisors and cosponsoring social and educational programs. MACCs also can enhance student enrollment by participating in recruitment.
It is common for the MACC to have a formal relationship with student organizations that have similar missions. Cosponsored activities between the MACC and student organizations often include cultural festivals, sorority and fraternity step shows, lectures, and art exhibits. In addition, multicultural affairs offices and culture centers have traditionally sponsored major campus programs such as Kwanzaa and ethnic commemorative months (i.e., Black History Month) that solicit volunteers and cosponsorship from student organizations. Staff members of MACCs provide important advising and support to student organizations, which often have difficulty finding suitable advisors who understand their goals, mission, and culture; this is especially true for Greek-letter organizations. These organizations seek advisory leadership from MACCs because they perceive the staff to be more open and willing to assist them.

MACCs also can play a strong role in recruitment initiatives. Hefner’s article (2002) “Black Cultural Centers: Standing on Shaky Ground?” discussed the possible future of cultural centers at PWIs: “Cultural centers are a critical part of recruiting and retaining students of color at White colleges and universities” (p. 26). Many admissions offices, guided by university policies to diversify the incoming first-year student cohort, will seek to build a partnership with the multicultural affairs or ethnic centers. Admissions office employees can benefit from the cultural resources available: input from MACC staff on factors that attract this population; brochures and materials that can be sent to prospective students; and programs for students during campus visits. For MACCs, this partnership provides early outreach to targeted populations, giving them a sense of the resources available to them at the institution. Students who have a keen awareness of the support systems in place may find it easier to choose which college to attend.

MACCs can also play a significant role in student retention. Career services, academic advising offices, residential life, and academic affairs are all departments that can benefit from partnerships with MACCs. Shuford and Palmer (2004) asserted that MACCs were instrumental in helping faculty members create courses, establishing academic departments, and promoting interdisciplinary curricula such as ethnic studies. Moreover, MACCs made advisors and counselors aware of the issues facing racially underrepresented students so they could effectively help the students. While these examples certainly demonstrate the possibilities of collaboration, there are also barriers to building partnerships—especially
with student activities offices, which often compete with MACCs for the attention and participation of racially underrepresented students in out-of-class activities.

**Barriers to Collaboration between MACCs and SAOs**

Several factors might hinder collaborative efforts between SAOs and MACCs. Generally, SAOs provide a breadth of services that include educational, recreational, and leisure programming; consultation services to student organizations (i.e., program planning, budget management, officer training); and leadership education programs. MACC and SAO administrators must be willing to identify and overcome hindrances to effective collaboration if they are to maximize student engagement. Hindrances include, but are not limited to, institutional climate; inaccurate campus perception of the MACC; policies and procedures specific to the MACC or SAO; and fear of consolidation.

One major obstacle that can prevent meaningful collaboration is institutional culture, which can either support or discourage collaboration. The extent to which MACC and SAO staff believe upper-level administrators are sincere about collaboration can determine the extent to which they reach out to collaborate with one another. When MACC, SAO, or other student life administrators believe that positive outcomes for their respective units result from sole ownership of programming initiatives, they are less likely to initiate collaborative programs. Another potential obstacle for collaboration is campus perception of the MACC and the SAO. As students become more engaged with the activities of the MACC, a sense of ownership naturally evolves. This may send an overt or covert message to White students, for example, that their presence at the MACC is not welcomed or valued. This is the epitome of the fortress mentality.

Likewise, racially underrepresented students can very easily perceive the SAO as catering only to White students. As a result, they may perceive that mainstream activities are not welcoming of diverse participants or perspectives. For example, traditional university events that are rooted in Whiteness, such as homecoming or Greek Week, may be perceived as unwelcoming and to some degree boring by racially underrepresented students. Such perceptions of these administrative areas can prevent meaningful engagement and exchange.

A third hindrance to collaboration between the SAO and the MACC is separate policies and procedures for each. Because the MACC targets a specific
community of students, faculty, and staff in its outreach, its policies may cater specifically to that population. The MACC may have its own events management processes, allocation procedures for student organizations, and even cosponsorship guidelines. The SAO may have difficulty working within the boundaries and guidelines of the MACC operation.

One last hindrance to collaboration is fear of consolidation, particularly for MACCs. MACC administrators often find themselves justifying the existence, outreach, impact, and rationale of their programs to campus and community critics. Other administrative units whose target population and services are specialized—women’s centers, LGBT student support centers, religious or interfaith centers—must also balance the task of meeting the needs of their target audience and justifying why specialized services are needed. When the MACC cannot clearly justify its existence to the satisfaction of influential critics, the fear of consolidation becomes relevant. Hefner’s (2002) article quotes one MACC administrator as saying, “We . . . get caught up in a zero-sum game because they think resources are scarce” (p. 25). Another administrator noted, “Tensions have occurred essentially on campuses where there is only one center—and . . . students are fighting for a bigger piece of the pie” (p. 25). All these factors can inhibit collaboration between the MACC and the SAO.

**Recommendations for Collaboration Between SAOs and MACCs**

These recommendations may help increase collaboration between multicultural affairs and culture centers and various offices within student affairs divisions.

**Collaboration Through Orientation**

On many campuses, SAOs coordinate orientation activities, where students learn about opportunities for involvement in student government, programming boards, community service, and Greek life. This is a prime opportunity for the MACC to become a visible partner in meaningful engagement to the incoming first-year and transfer class. Patton (2006a) suggests that Black culture centers play a crucial role in reaching out to Black first-year students, letting them know
they have a space and a support system. She notes that Black culture centers often provide welcome week and orientation activities that do not undermine similar universitywide programs, but instead provide more detailed information not necessarily covered in the broader program (i.e., finding hair products, ethnic food, and churches). The MACC can present information on involvement opportunities in partnership with the SAO and broadly discuss the potential for student life enrichment through both special interest and mainstream campus organizations. Patton (2006) wrote, “Because first-year programming is so critical to student adjustment, BCC directors and staff should work toward fostering collaborative relationships with other campus offices . . . ” (p. 642).

**Collaboration for Leadership Development**

Many SAOs engage student leaders in some form of leadership education. This presents at least two opportunities for collaboration. The first is involving the MACC in planning and coordinating the classes, perhaps by including diversity issues. Topics such as *Multicultural Competencies for Effective Leadership* or *Understanding Diversity’s Place in Leadership* could significantly contribute to any leadership education course.

The second area for potential collaboration in leadership education is student leadership retreats. How often do ethnic minority student leaders, primarily loyal to the MACC, attend SAO leadership retreats? Patton (2006b) noted that without involvement in their culture center, students were less likely to get involved in larger, more mainstream campus activities. Through their involvement with cultural centers, these students gained valuable skills that would easily transfer to leadership roles on campus. Where resources permit, the MACC might sponsor its own student leadership retreat as well. The MACC and the SAO might consider appointing student leaders to attend each other’s retreats to become familiar with issues important to each community. This undoubtedly can open up possibilities for increased collaboration, not only between the offices, but also among the student organizations advised by these offices.

**Programming Board Collaboration**

For effective student input and advocacy, both MACCs and SAOs commonly use programming boards. Through these boards, students can voice their opinions
on programs and activities, and coordinate the events they deem most appealing to their peer constituency groups. With collaboration between the MACC and SAO programming boards, the potential for engaging more of the student body is greater. Collaboration can take the form of broader campus programming such as the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration or various heritage months, or it could consist of late-night programming, lecture series, bus trips, movie series, plays, and other functions typical of both the SAO and the MACC.

**Collaboration for Diversity Education**

As institutions of higher education seek greater diversity and multiculturalism, they must ensure their students have greater opportunities to interact cross-culturally in settings that welcome challenging dialogue. The SAO and MACC are in an optimal position to collaborate on diversity education programming that introduces students to general concepts and allows them to learn about and from one another. While many students participate in organizations based upon commonalities and comfort, a diversity education program can encourage them to move beyond their comfort zones to learn about other cultures, and accept and embrace difference. Through partnering for diversity education, students of all backgrounds gain a higher level of consciousness.

Such an effort might be best spearheaded by the SAO and the MACC. Both offices stand to gain from this effort because students affiliated with the offices individually can come together collectively for diversity education training. The SAO and MACC would be modeling the way for their students, helping them understand the possibilities of collaboration. Because MACCs have the trust and respect of racially underrepresented students, their staff can encourage students to understand the importance of interacting with students beyond the office. They can help students understand that collaboration does not erase their uniqueness, but rather enhances their ability to connect with others. The SAO, which often has a larger budget, can enhance marketing and provide facilities for a diversity education program, while the MACC can lend great resources for formulating the diversity education components. Encouragement from the SAO is crucial for getting majority-culture students involved—especially because of the often misconstrued notion that diversity means only Black students or other racially underrepresented populations.
COLLABORATION FOR OVERALL ENGAGEMENT

Many students find affiliation with the SAO or the MACC and rarely go beyond those boundaries to explore other opportunities offered elsewhere on campus. When the SAO and the MACC collaborate by cosponsoring organizational fairs and workshops, they can bring students into a setting that exposes them to other forms of involvement. It may be helpful to have highly involved students from both entities tell audiences how their collegiate experiences have been enhanced as a result of participating in SAO and MACC activities. Equally important for increasing overall involvement is to create informational brochures or Web sites with SAO and MACC information linked or cross-referenced. The content should highlight benefits for all students of greater involvement in the SAO and MACC. The MACC and the SAO also can create a joint student ambassador team to reach out to the campus community and encourage all students to get involved with the programs and services of the MACC and SAO.

CONCLUSION

These examples are not a complete list of collaborative opportunities for the SAO and MACC, but rather are a springboard for a discussion about collaborative efforts. As student life administrators become more creative in finding ways to contribute to the student experience, the SAO and the MACC can and should be integral to that effort. The opportunities for collaboration and meaningful engagement are increased when these administrative areas can combine forces for the good of student development. Indeed, these suggestions might assist in the effective promotion of diversity and multiculturalism in college unions and student activities offices.
REFERENCES


