

Transcript: What is the Intercultural Center?

Courtney Jones Carney

Hey, my name is Courtney Jones Carney.

Rosemary Ferreira

And I am Rosemary Ferreira, and welcome to The Table podcast where we unpack questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events. So, Courtney, how do we know each other?

Courtney Jones Carney

Well, we work together in the Intercultural Center, but we've never actually met each other in real life.

Rosemary Ferreira

No, I actually don't wear glasses...

Record scratching sound effect.

Rosemary Ferreira

...even though I show them all the time here, that's one thing. Anyway, random fact! I just thought about that because in the virtual setting, I just feel like, people think I wear glasses, but these are just blue light glasses.

Courtney Jones Carney

But you know they're not going to see you, right?

Laughter.

Rosemary Ferreira

I know that something we both deeply care about is social justice. We both identify as diversity, equity, and inclusion educators and scholar practitioners. Can you talk a little bit about the work that we do at the Intercultural Center?

Courtney Jones Carney

So, the Intercultural Center was founded in June of 2020 as a direct result of student voice and advocacy. Our mission is to provide intentional support to students from historically underrepresented communities, to provide educational resources to all students, staff, and faculty at the University of Maryland, Baltimore that promote, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and intercultural education to all students, staff, and faculty at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Or UMB. We are housed in the Division of Student Affairs, which works

with students, staff, and faculty from central administration and the seven schools and programs at UMB.

Rosemary Ferreira

Through collaborative efforts, the Intercultural Center serves to both guide the University in its work on diversity, equity, and inclusion and hold itself and the University accountable for committing to become an anti-racism institution. In today's episode you'll hear from the co-chairs of the Multicultural Task Force that was established in 2018 to develop the Intercultural Center. Dr. Patty Alvarez, the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs at UMB and Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright, an alum from UMB's School of Social Work who served as a student leader.

Courtney Jones Carney

So, before we get started, let's talk about some terms and acronyms that are going to come up during today's podcast. So, ISLSI. ISLSI stands for Interprofessional Student Learning and Service Initiatives. This office no longer exists. However, prior to the creation of the Intercultural Center, ISLSI provided programs and activities that were connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as student activities and leadership development. So, while ISLSI set a University foundation on which the Intercultural Center was built, the Intercultural Center has a more intentional focus on providing support and a space of belonging for historically underrepresented students. Historically underrepresented students can represent Black, indigenous, people of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, women, trans, and gender non-conforming students who have been systematically denied and excluded from higher education.

Rosemary Ferreira

In our interview with Patty and Vanessa we also discuss GSA and USGA, which stand for Graduate Student Association and University Student Government Association. They are both University-wide organizations for students at UMB. At one point in our interview, Vanessa identifies as a first-generation student. First-generation students are those whose parents and/or primary caretakers do not have a four-year degree.

Courtney Jones Carney

So, those are some of the terms. So, let's get started.

Patty Alvarez

My name is Patty Alvarez. I am the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and so I oversee central student affairs at UMB. But I also collaborate quite a bit with each of the schools and their student affairs deans.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

Hi everyone, my name is Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright. I use she/ her/ hers pronouns. I am currently the Assistant Director of Latinx Student Development at Towson University. But I am a proud alumni of UMB, so I was a student at the School of Social Work Class of 2019. So not so long ago. Um and I was involved in the development of the Center. So great to be here!

Rosemary Ferreira

Let's jump right into talking about the development of the Center. Walk us through that like how? What was the motivation behind it? What conversations were being had and then how was that creation of it?

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

So actually the development started even before myself being involved in this work, and so students at the school of social work were originally advocating for the School of Social Work in particular to become a sanctuary campus for students. So, during the election of President Trump in 2016. I mean, there was a lot of fear at the School of Social Work in regards to undocumented students in particular who are feeling as though how would they feel comfortable and safe being on campus with the rhetoric that was happening in our country, and so because of that students kind of gathered together. I'm like OK, what should we do about this? And so those students came together, they had a presentation at the School of Social Work for on the Dean of School of Social Work, as well as other professors and students were involved to do the presentation to kind of talk about this issue. And so when I was involved was after they had graduated, there is a meeting that was being set up with President Perman to discuss this particular issue. And as I got involved I realized that it wasn't just undocumented students that needed resources and some of support, but it was other marginalized communities across campus who needed a place that they can feel at home. The way that I thought when I was participating with ISLSI on campus. And so I that's kind of how those conversations started, and then it was around the same exact time that Dr. Alvarez started in her position so then we were able to come together.

Patty Alvarez

And so I felt really honored and fortunate to Co-chair this Multi-Cultural Center Task Force with Vanessa. We really kicked off as Vanessa mentioned, Dr. Perman charged the creation of this task in essentially January 2018, which was right when I started at the institution, and so we took some time, I took some time to get to know the campus a little bit, and then really started appreciated Vanessa in her work over the summer with me, and really, we're ready to kick off that fall 2018. And so yeah, we were really inclusive and comprehensive in the process. We had a taskforce that included representation from each of the schools as well as some central UMB units on campus and then also had student representation. We also really conducted a lot of outreach to students. We met with over 289 students during 10 meetings during, I guess over the span of a couple of months and then our committee, our Task Force met monthly from September 2018 until February 2019. We conducted a survey of students, faculty, and staff and got received quite a bit of feedback.

And when Vanessa and I met with students, one of the things that we would often say is that students have asked for this. You know, whether it was the social work students who initially spoke with Dr. Perman, Dr. Ward, or it was feedback that we received just in different settings

and those groups were, you know, in those group meetings with students but also with the Campus Climate survey that we do.

And at the end of our time together the task force, we issued some recommendations to Dr. Perman and Dr. Ward. I think it was in March of 2019 and that summer we received approval from Dr. Perman to start. To create a multicultural quote, unquote multicultural center on campus and so there was some more work that needed to be done in terms of creating an executive director position and finally posted that position. I think the pandemic impacted some of our progress on the search for that position, but also feel very fortunate to have conducted a great search and our very own Courtney Jones Carney was selected to serve as the inaugural Executive Director of the Intercultural Center and the Intercultural Center. Let me rephrase that. She was selected to serve as the executive director of the Intercultural Leadership and Engagement Center.

Courtney Jones Carney

And so you folks mentioned that the origins of the center started with students. You talked about the number of students that were interviewed. Can you maybe just speak a little bit about the significance of involving students in this process?

Patty Alvarez

For me, the creation of the center and really the task force was due to the advocacy of students and so for us we are very student-centered campus. We value students and all that they bring to this campus community and so in the UMB community. And so it was really, really important to involve them in this process, because it really was a center asked for by students and for would be created for students. And so it was really important to reach out to connect with students from across all of the schools as well as the GSA and USGA.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

Yeah, I also think with that I, I think previously to student involvement. There was an assumption that a multicultural center space did not belong in a graduate level campus and the historically there's been more of these sort of centers at undergraduate campuses. But really even myself as a first generation student going into grad school with anything, I think in grad school there was even more of a need for these type of centers where you felt even more marginalized within a campus that was a predominately white institution. And so I really believe that without the student input without students advocating for it, I'm not sure if it would have continued on to be something that would happen on campus and not because UMB is not student centered or that they didn't care about students, but I don't think that they realized the need that was on campus at the time.

Rosemary Ferreira

I appreciate you sharing that Vanessa and I would actually love to hear more about your experience. In particular, you know you just identified as a first-generation student. What was your experience as a grad student at UMB?

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

I feel like in undergrad so I'm originally from California and so just to switch itself from Los Angeles to Baltimore was a big change for myself. But also when I first came to campus, I was used to, like I mentioned in an undergrad campus, having resources and offices they can go to and ask questions. And so when I came to campus, I didn't find anything and I was like OK. Well who should I ask? Um, with these questions because I don't know anything about grad school. I'm just showing up to this space, but I had seen a posting for a diversity fellowship with ISLSI and so at the time I was like Oh well, OK, well this sounds something that I can do and I need a job and so luckily I was involved in that office and because of that I was then exposed to what resources were on campus. But I think without that resource, I would not have known and many of the other students that I was involved with at the School of Social Work I'm I started as a leader for LUCHA, which is Latinx student organization at the School of Social Work. And a lot of those students also were looking for a similar space, but that they didn't really know what office or who to ask for where they can be affirmed, not just in their educational journey, but also in their personal identity. And so I think the ability to do both simultaneously is super important to the success of students.

Patty Alvarez

And I would add that I think that cultural centers have played an important part in my development, as well as a student and as a professional. And I, you know, as an undergrad, you know would go to the La Casa, you know the Latino Cultural Center on my campus and connected with other diversity centers on campuses. I've even worked in those centers I served as a multicultural center director at an institution and another cultural center at another institution. And so I absolutely see the value in students being able to see themselves reflected in the institution, both in terms of the programming and the staff, and even just peers. And so I think that you know this isn't a new thing as Vanessa mentioned in terms of having these types of centers on university campuses, but I think that you know, UMB was and is in a time of transition at the time when the Multicultural Center Task Force was charged. The creation of that was the charge was given there were schools who have lead DEI, diversity, education, inclusion leaders within some of the schools that that existed and exists today, but I think over the past couple of years. I think that the campus has transitioned to the acknowledgement of, or at least the recognition of the value of these sorts of resources and individuals and entities on our campus, and the work that can be offered. We've seen since that time I think probably all if not all I think all or perhaps all of the schools will soon have a quote, unquote chief diversity officer. We also, as a campus, are in the process of hiring a chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer. And, um, there's just been a lot of growth that has happened on campus in the area of DEI.

Rosemary Ferreira

What do you envision for the Center for students?

Patty Alvarez

With the Multicultural Center Task Force, we talked about the mission of the Intercultural Center having a threefold mission, and that included providing a space in place where underrepresented students and other diverse populations felt, could find support as well as a sense of belonging, providing innovative experiences and opportunities for intercultural and interprofessional leadership development to help prepare students with the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to serve as culturally competent professionals, as well as to serve as a strategic partner for faculty, staff, and administrators in creating inclusive climate and advancing DEI priorities.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

Yeah, I would completely agree with Dr. Alvarez and everything that she mentioned. I would also add to that I would hope that the center would be a center that's ever evolving in a sense of wanting to constantly be reevaluating what are the needs of students. And how can we make sure that student input is involved in the process because many times you know the sometimes something is created and we think that OK, this is what students may need, but then it's kind of defeating the purpose if it's not actually serving the needs of the students and so I hope that it continues to be a place where students feel validated in their identity and also a place where they can connect across campus. I know sometimes UMB just due to how different each of the schools are, it's very hard to connect amongst other schools and so hopefully this place for connection and a place where student needs can be heard and listened to and valued as well.

Courtney Jones Carney

I'm so happy that you mentioned student needs, because I think that that definitely is should be could be a vision for the intercultural center and so really connecting to those roots and how the center even came to be and ensuring that students and their needs are always at the forefront. And not in a way where we're like capitalizing on their ideas and their thoughts. But like in a collaborative sense where they're fully involved in the process in the decision-making. They're serving as advisors, helping us to, you know, make those decisions to move forward in a way that's going to allow the center to evolve as our student population is evolving.

And so. In this conversation, we've said intercultural bajillion times, right, and so perhaps this might be a good time to define it. What does intercultural mean to you? Because this may be a term that's somewhat unfamiliar to some of the folks who are listening to us today. So how would you describe it and define it?

Patty Alvarez

As of now, you know we've got probably each one of us has a different definition of what intercultural means, and so we do need to figure out and we do need to define for the purposes of the Intercultural Center, but even for UMB in terms of you know what does intercultural mean for us? What I would say though is you know as we engaged in what was called the Multicultural Center Taskforce work. You know one of the things that we did say is that we thought that multicultural was too limiting. I would even say from an higher education

perspective, there's kind of been a move. There's been a move away from referring to multicultural centers as multicultural centers and more of a shift to intercultural inclusive excellence. There's been some precedents too on our campus, Courtney was involved in establishing in conjunction with the Graduate School an Intercultural Leadership Graduate Certificate program. So there was some precedence in terms of using that word and what that means for us as an institution. But for me it really is providing opportunities for individuals to increase their awareness, knowledge, and skills. Knowing that we are all coming with very different experiences and perspectives and so really providing opportunities where individuals can engage with one another and learn about their own distinct cultures and experiences and perspectives. But knowing that undergirding that is really a lot of history.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

I feel like in in in simple terms for myself, even if it's not necessarily the definition that UMB is using, I would say when I think of intercultural, I think of the celebration of difference and diversity versus just acceptance and tolerance. I see it as a word that essentially just means that you know you're not just we're not just doing this because, OK, we have different students and you know we're trying to check a box, but in the sense of your identity and all the unique characteristics of that is valued, and so that's what I think of when I think of the word intercultural.

Patty Alvarez

I agree with Vanessa, but I also think that you know what we're trying to do as an institution of higher education is really to ensure that learning is occurring. Learning about individuals' experiences, but also learning about historical you know of injustices and discrimination and power and privilege and how that plays itself out and impacts our experiences as learners, but also future professionals.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

Absolutely, I think when thinking of someone's identity, I think that also includes the history of that person right? And their identity. And so I absolutely agree in terms of the learning and growing and development and especially at UMB being that most if not all of the students are going to be entering a field of service, whether it's in the health care field, whether it's law or social work, and so the ability to understand individuals experiences and learn about individual experiences and be able to acknowledge that we all come from a different lens and positionality, I think is super important and so yeah, completely agree in terms of education, I think that that's a part of it, right? That's a part of identity.

Courtney Jones Carney

Yeah, and I think you know what I really like about the word intercultural. I gravitate to it is it seems to acknowledge that there are different cultures that are functioning in the same space at the same time, and so not just thinking that we're going into a space and there's one culture. And this is how we behave and everything's fine. But recognizing that there are going to be different cultures in that. Case, and that we're going to have to figure out how to navigate that

space, because there isn't going to be one culture. Even if we believe that there's a dominant culture that folks have to, you know, try to shift towards and so intercultural. Acknowledges to me that there are multiple cultures in the space and that individuals have to do work to determine how they are going to communicate and function and adjust to the various cultures that are occupying that particular space.

Patty Alvarez

And I think that that is one of, you know, the benefits of having an intercultural center is that you know this will be the center will be an is a key contributor in terms of shaping student learning and I would even say in terms of collaborating with other faculty and staff administrators on campus to be able to create and shape learning.

Courtney Jones Carney

Also, it's important to note that while we're doing this learning, it may not always feel good, right like we like the goal is to stretch ourselves so the goal is to develop and development sometimes can make us feel like, you know, we missed the mark of it. Or it might make us feel. Uncomfortable or ashamed? Or wondering like why did I do this five years ago? Why wasn't I at this stage before? And so you know this, there could be some moments when folks are engaging with the Intercultural Center or some of the initiatives associated with the Intercultural Center where they don't immediately feel great. But that's part of the process. That's part of that process of learning and growing and developing, and I think it's important that people come into the to some of the aspects of the space, knowing that they're going to have to push themselves. But it may be step in and sit in some discomfort while they are reflecting and planning and determining what their actions are going to be so that they can make positive changes towards their development.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

And when I think of a center such as an intercultural center, I think it's a two part fold situation where on one side it definitely is. Is it will be a space of growth and development and learning and pushing past. Maybe knowledge you don't even realize that you left or. Having to unlearn things that you might have already thought about that you thought were right, and then you realize, like oh wait a minute. Why did I even think about that? But then I think on the flip side, it's also going to be a space of comfort where students who may be in their individual schools may not have the opportunity to be amongst individuals that they can relate to that look like them that they have similar experience on that they can find a place of comfort as well. And so I think it's a two part. Um thing where it's not just like just the learning or just the comfort, but it's a little bit of all. Yeah.

Rosemary Ferreira

Yeah, that makes me think about like the safe versus brave space argument of like you know, oh we need to have a safe space for students to be able to talk about, you know, issues related to social justice. And then folks were like, no, we need folks to feel brave, you know, because they need to confront these, you know systems of oppression and I think. To your point, like. I, I

believe, you know, as a student affairs professional that we need to see something that is both right. That like it should feel safe enough, especially for students from marginalized communities because every day feels harmful, right? Every day feels especially when you're going to a predominantly white institution, feels like you're being undermined, feels like you're being devalued, the knowledge that you know your community has isn't being acknowledged in the classroom, right? And so there is that need for comfort and sense of belonging and as well for folks who might come from dominant identities, there needs to be this leveling up right there. This being held accountable for and so that does the man's right this by pushing on this bravery as well.

Are there any additional thoughts, hopes? Just anything that you want to put out into the universe or the intercultural center.

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright

Yeah, I'm also well, two things. I think one. I'm also very excited for the future of UMB in the center, and I think leadership is to burn port in and so I'm really excited with the leadership that the center currently has. And in order for it to be moving forward. And so I'm excited for the future of that, students will have the ability to have a place like this to go to and feel validated, and hopefully this will lead to some students having positive experiences throughout their time at UMB. Not just academically, but also personally. Um and then second, it encourages me, um, thinking of just student advocacy as an organizing efforts and looking back at the work that was put into a lot of this on the development. And thinking that sometimes it doesn't work. But other times advocacy does push forward. Initiatives that lead to positive changes and so. I hope that students will feel encouraged to continue to advocate for what they believe in.

End Credits (Producer, Angela Jackson): The Table is a production of the Intercultural Center in the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Maryland Baltimore. It's hosted and produced and produced by Courtney Jones Carney. This episode was written by Rosemary Ferreira. The show's executive producer and editor is me, Angela Jackson, senior marketing specialist in the Division of Student Affairs. A big thank you to our guests, Dr. Patty Alvarez and Vanessa Gonazalez-Wright. For more information about the Intercultural Center, including events where students can learn more about race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current, visit umaryland.edu/ile. See you next time.