



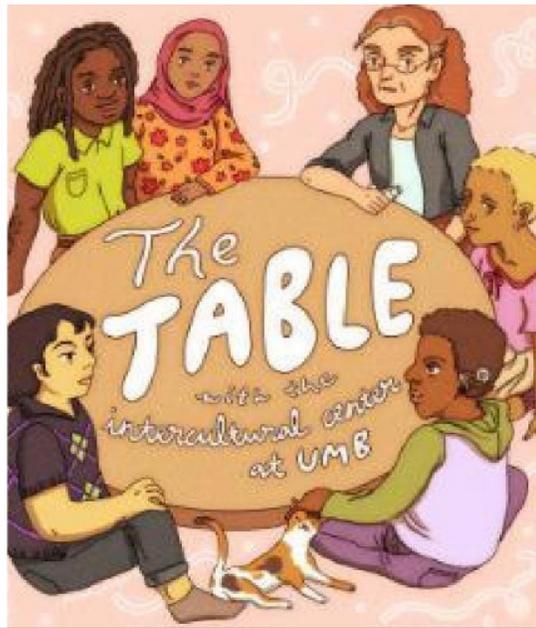
UMB News

Intercultural Center: A Place for Diversity, Dialogue

May 19, 2021 | By [Mary Therese Phelan](#)



Courtney J. Jones Carney (top) and Rosemary Ferreira host "The Table" podcast, which explores race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events.



A space of belonging, value, affirmation, and welcome.

That's how officials describe [University of Maryland, Baltimore's \(UMB\) new Intercultural Center](#), which opened with a virtual launch and will experience more in-person activity as faculty, staff, and students eventually return to campus.

"I must admit, when I applied for the position I currently hold, I never envisioned that the Intercultural Center launch would take place via Zoom," **Courtney J. Jones Carney, MBA**, director of the Intercultural Center and executive director of [Intercultural Leadership and Engagement](#), said during the virtual kickoff. She leads the center along with associate director **Rosemary Ferreira, MEd.**

"COVID-19 has changed so many of our realities," said Jones Carney, who also is an adjunct professor in the Graduate School and serves as program director for the Intercultural Leadership Certificate Program. "However, one thing that has not changed is the necessity to foster a sense of belonging and acknowledge the needs and lived experiences of historically

marginalized and underrepresented students, staff, and faculty at UMB."

The kickoff program featured remarks from UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, whom Jones Carney said "has been very thoughtful and intentional about taking steps toward establishing UMB as a university that actively works toward anti-racism and anti-oppression."

"One of my goals as president is to help create a more inclusive and equitable UMB," Jarrell said. "And the intention of the Intercultural Center is to create that dedicated space, a space where all individuals feel valued, recognized, affirmed, and welcome, that they belong here. It's a space for students to find connections with others who share their background and experiences — but, conversely, and just as important, connections with students from different backgrounds."

The center will help students to become culturally competent professionals that will make them more effective as clinicians or practitioners, Jarrell said. "And that is our mission here — to improve the human condition and serve the public good. And, of course, that will demonstrate just how great UMB is. We all know how great it is, but that will show it even better."

The Intercultural Center grew from the now-defunct Office of Interprofessional Student Learning & Service Initiatives (ISLSI).

"That office had a long name that didn't really speak to the focus of the department," Jones Carney explained. Many signature programs were established through ISLSI such as the President's Student Leadership Institute, the President's Symposium and White Paper Project, I Heart UMB Day, and various heritage month programs that took place over the last decade.

"The foundation established through ISLSI was used to build the unit of Intercultural Leadership and Engagement, which is a much larger unit that is composed of multiple functional areas that will one day hopefully grow into departments," Jones Carney said. "For now, these functional areas focus on student development through the lens of leadership, supportive student organizations, civic engagement, and the Intercultural Center. While the Intercultural Center is part of this larger unit, it has a distinct and intentional focus on being a recognized space of belonging, a place for intercultural learning that focuses on diversity, equity, inclusion, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and cultural competence and a leader in examining and addressing the impact of policies and practices that disproportionately impact historically underrepresented groups. Hopefully the name that has been selected for this center is a better indication of the work that will be done."

Students attend UMB not only to learn about their chosen fields of study, but also to prepare for working with individuals and groups of people "in the real world, from all walks of life and with their lived experiences," added **Shanice Harris**, treasurer of the [University Student Government Association](#) (USGA.) "And in this time, what that means is experiences that include racism, oppression, and marginalization on systemic and individual levels. A significant part of our preparation includes how we engage with one another as fellow students, and the levels to which we hold one another accountable."

In response to the racial injustice that occurred in the nation in the summer and fall of 2020, Harris and USGA president **Nivedita Hegdekar** worked to build the framework for what is now known as the Equity Committee, a student-run body devoted to strengthening efforts for equity through anti-oppression and social justice at UMB, explained Hegdekar. The committee will work with the Intercultural Center to expand collective and community-based education, training, and policy framing. The committee, which will include representatives from each of the UMB schools and student leaders of school-specific organizations that are interested in collaborating with USGA, will incorporate existing efforts with the University.

The seed for an Intercultural Center was planted in 2019 when then-president Jay A. Perman, MD, and **Roger J. Ward, EdD, JD, MSL, MPA**, interim UMB provost, executive vice president, and dean of the Graduate School, met with students from the [University of Maryland School of Social Work \(UMSSW\)](#) including **Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright, MSW '19, LMSW**, a UMSSW alumnus who served as a student leader.

"The Intercultural Center was developed out of student advocacy, that student voices and feedback are valued, and this is an example of how seriously your feedback is considered and implemented," said **Patty Alvarez, PhD, MS**, assistant vice president of student affairs. "Discussions around creating a center could not have occurred without the feedback and advocacy of students from the School of Social Work."

Students at the time expressed a need for resources for undocumented students, faculty, and staff, as well as racially and ethnically underrepresented students, faculty, and staff, and an increased focus on creating a more inclusive campus, Alvarez said.

Before that, in spring 2018, a [Multicultural Center Taskforce](#) was created, chaired by Alvarez and Gonzalez-Wright.

"We look forward to collaborating with each of you and many others and achieving the goals of the Intercultural Center and UMB to make inclusive campus environments where all students can be successful," Alvarez said.

The mission of the center, said Ferreira, is to develop initiatives and resources that foster a sense of belonging and acknowledge the needs and lived experiences of historically marginalized students, staff, and faculty at UMB.

"We are also deeply committed to developing anti-racism and anti-oppression educational programs that will inform the practice of our current and future health care, law, and human services professionals," she said. "We envision the Intercultural Center will develop spaces of belonging, spaces of courage, and spaces of critical thinking."

Another creation of the Intercultural Center is "[The Table](#)," a new monthly podcast that delves into questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events. Jones Carney and Ferreira also hold virtual office hours where they welcome suggestions and opportunities for collaboration. Details can be found [here](#).

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