

“History of Ethnic Studies at USD”  
Student research project by: Terisha Taylor  
Ind Study 499  
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For this research project, I chose to use a qualitative method of research. The information is based on seven interviews and data analysis. The interview subjects consisted of two former students: Christopher Wilson and Stephanie Siordia, one former faculty member: Dr. Eugene Labovitz, and four current faculty members: Dr. Gail Perez, Alberto Pulido, Dr. Michelle Camacho, and Dr. Patrick Drinan, who were involved in the beginning stages up to the creation of the Ethnic Studies Program.

The University of San Diego (USD) was chartered in 1949.<sup>1</sup> The National Association for Ethnic Studies was founded in the United States in 1972.<sup>2</sup> The need for an Ethnic Studies Program at USD began to surface in 1989,<sup>3</sup> at a time when the students of color comprised only fifteen percent of the entire student body.<sup>4</sup> Since the Ethnic Studies Program, by design, provides a “liberating educational process that challenges Western imperialism and Eurocentrism,”<sup>5</sup> with hopes of restoring and recreating the history of “those Americans whom history has neglected; to identify and credit their contributions to making U.S. society and culture,”<sup>6</sup> it was imperative for all the forerunners of the movement be incorporated at USD. Although there was an Urban Studies Program offered, it did not incorporate all categories of the marginalized groups,

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<sup>1</sup> University of San Diego Website

<sup>2</sup> The National Association for Ethnic Studies website: <http://www.ethnicstudies.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Eugene Labovitz: History of The Multicultural Center and Ethnic Studies at USD

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Eugene Labovitz: History of The Multicultural Center and Ethnic Studies at USD

<sup>5</sup> The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies by Evelyn Hu-DeHart p. 32

<sup>6</sup> The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies by Evelyn Hu-DeHart p. 32

nor did it address the issue of race and ethnicity, as intended by the Irvine Grant I, which sought to “infuse” multiculturalism within courses.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, in 1990, high level administrative representatives from the Irvine foundation visited the campus. During their visit, the representatives declared USD “homogeneous” and in need of additional funding to help institutionalize diversity on campus.<sup>8</sup> USD campus was so homogeneous that there was a possibility of losing its accreditation if it failed to diversify its student body, faculty, and curriculum.<sup>9</sup> Due to a strong need to diversify the campus and intense need for a more welcoming campus atmosphere, USD received the original Irvine Grant I. Although this grant did not include creating an Ethnic Studies Program, nor include the building of the Multicultural Center, it would be through this grant that the first course with an Ethnic Studies emphasis would be offered in an effort to promote diversity. While other schools, such as San Francisco State and the University of California at Berkeley, had adopted an Ethnic Studies Program as early as 1960 and late 1970’s,<sup>10</sup> USD had yet to adopt the program.

On April 26, 1993, a student coalition presented the concept of adding a Multi-Cultural Center to the Irvine Grant Steering Committee.<sup>11</sup> This concept was motivated by the desperation of students of color to identify with and feel welcomed at USD. Since no classes offered students of color the opportunity to learn more about their cultural identity and they had little to no representation of them on campus. As a result, students of color felt it necessary to have at least one place where students can take refuge and enjoy their

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Eugene Labovitz: History of The Multicultural Center and Ethnic Studies at USD

<sup>8</sup> Interview by Terisha Taylor with Dr. Eugene Labovitz on March 3, 2008

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Eugene Labovitz: History of The Multicultural Center and Ethnic Studies at USD

<sup>10</sup> San Francisco State University Ethnic Studies website <http://www.sfsu.edu/~ethnicst/>; U.C. Berkeley Ethnic Studies website: Chronology of Ethnic Studies <http://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/documents/Chronology%20of%20Ethnic%20Studies.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> “Reflections on the Movement for Ethnic Studies at USD by Geno Aguilar and Gail Perez

cultural heritage.<sup>12</sup> In May of 1993 the President's Advisory Council voted in favor of the center and accepted the proposed constitution in October that same year. The room was named the United Front Multicultural Center (UFMC). It became the home of student organizations and a safe space for both students of color and various other marginalized groups.<sup>13</sup>

In spring of 1994 the first Ethnic Studies class supported by the Irvine grant, *Perspectives on Civil Rights Movement*, was offered. Shortly thereafter, in 1995 the movement for an Ethnic Studies Program began, with a small group of faculty and students. While there are varying opinions as to whether or not this movement was student, faculty, or administrative motivated, it is important to understand that it was through these separate but equally important groups that the program was developed. There were two different primary groups that were developed in 1997, one of which was comprised of students to form the Student Committee for Ethnic Studies, as well as an Ethnic Studies Task Force which was encompassed primarily of faculty created to develop the Ethnic Studies Minor.<sup>14</sup>

In the year 2000 there was a "Walk for Consciousness" in response to several reported hate crimes that happened on campus.<sup>15</sup> This "walk" was one of the most powerful moments in the movement for the Ethnic Studies Program. The rally was covertly coordinated with student from Associated Students (AS), fraternities, sororities, and other allies of the Ethnic Studies movement. Undoubtedly, meeting in secrecy, when necessary, allowed the construction of the event to be protected from "administrative

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Christopher Wilson by Terisha Taylor on March 24, 2008

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Stephanie Siordia by Terisha Taylor on March 23, 2008

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Eugene Labovitz: History of The Multicultural Center and Ethnic Studies at USD

<sup>15</sup> "Reflections on the Movement for Ethnic Studies at USD" by Geno Aguilar and Gail Perez

interference.”<sup>16</sup> In conjunction, the Ethnic Studies Student Committee sent press releases to the local media station to notify them of the event, which also notified administrators, but also aided the students to “outmaneuver” the administrators as well. They did this by selecting students, instead of administrator, to be media contacts and titled the students as the “representatives” of USD.<sup>17</sup> Coincidentally, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) happened to be visiting the campus on the same day as this event. With late notification, visiting WASC representatives and the presence of the media cameras, the situation quickly became heated for the university, causing a lot of tension between students and administrators. As WASC members departed from their meeting in the UFMC, they walked right into the 200 students that were gathered for the “Walk of Consciousness.” After being informed of what the students were marching about, WASC marched with the students in protest.<sup>18</sup> This was “a really big and important moment in the movement because it gave us power,” said former student and leader in the movement Christopher Wilson.

As time progressed, so did the illusion of diversifying the campus. However, in 2002 there were some significant signs of progression that would make history at USD. For instance, Chris Wilson was elected the first African-American Associated Student President and Dr. Michelle Camacho was hired,<sup>19</sup> through the sociology department, to teach courses in Ethnic Studies. Despite the huge success of the “Walk for Consciousness,” which was followed by a “Talk for Consciousness,” and the appearance of progression in September, of the same year, there were six incidents of hate crimes

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<sup>16</sup> “Reflections on the Movement for Ethnic Studies at USD by Geno Aguilar and Gail Perez

<sup>17</sup> “Reflections on the Movement for Ethnic Studies at USD by Geno Aguilar and Gail Perez

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Christopher Wilson by Terisha Taylor on March 24, 2008

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dr. Michelle Camacho by Terisha Taylor on March 25, 2008

reported over a two week span and three more reported in the following four weeks.<sup>20</sup> As a result, over a dozen students attended a training session on hate crimes in the month of November. In an attempt to deal with the hate crimes that continued to occur, a Public Safety officer, Rico Murgia, was designated to coordinate and investigate hate crimes. Following the acts of ignorance that occurred on campus, the administration approved Ethnic Studies as a major in December of 2002.<sup>21</sup>

There were three major goals of the Ethnic Studies movement, to put into action a “D” requirement, push for more faculty of color, and to have an Ethnic Studies become a major. In January 2003 the administration began considering implementing a requirement that a diversity class be taken by all students in order to fulfill their graduation requirements. Furthermore, the Board of Trustees approved Ethnic Studies as a major in April 2003.<sup>22</sup> By this time, USD had received two Irvine Grants totaling over one million dollars to train administrators in diversity and to diversify the campus, but those efforts were unsuccessful. It is estimated that “until the President and the Trustees fully embrace a commitment to cultural diversity involving financial resources, no effort to achieve pluralism will be successful.”<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Alberto Pulido was hired as the first Ethnic Studies Program Director in (INSERT MONTH) and the program had its first graduating class by May of 2003.

In 2005 the *Committee on Inclusion & Diversity* at USD implemented a mission to “advance initiatives and recommend changes in policies and practices...goals of creating a culture of inclusion, promoting cultural competence, and recruiting and

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<sup>20</sup> Union Tribune, Yang, Eleanor. “Uprooting The Seeds Of Hate: USD Combats Incidents of Intolerance on Campus”. 14 Jan 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Christopher Wilson by Terisha Taylor on March 24, 2008

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Christopher Wilson by Terisha Taylor on March 24, 2008

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Eugene Labovitz: History of The Multicultural Center and Ethnic Studies at USD

retaining diverse students, faculty, staff, and administrators.”<sup>24</sup> Since empirical evidence proves that “more people of color leave a campus not because they are on academic probation but because they don’t feel comfortable on campus,”<sup>25</sup> it was imperative that the areas of retention such as the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) be strong and supported; at that time it was. The creation of UFMC did not only become a place where students, regardless of ethnicity, could take refuge but also as some believed “validated the University’s efforts and commitment to diversity by providing resources, staff support, and programming.”<sup>26</sup>

Since then, there has been a negative shift in the areas of retention. Although, there are several different areas dedicated to retaining students of color; these areas have begun to fall short in their efforts. For example, the TRIO Program, located on the West side of campus, is unknown by many students. Furthermore, the UFMC has transformed from a safe haven where marginalized groups can learn to be leaders to a place of fun, games, and socialization.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, since the resignation of one of the most dedicated administrators, Michael Austin, in 2007, the EOP office has not been able to function as strongly and efficiently as it once had. With all the areas of retention in crisis, the Ethnic Studies Program will have, yet another, obstacle to overcome.<sup>28</sup>

Also in 2007, hate crimes were once again on the rise. In response to the series of hate crimes student from the Black Student Union (BSU) organized a “Wake Up” rally. Although there was a lot of support from student and some faculty, in addition to an

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<sup>24</sup> University of San Diego Website: *Committee on Inclusion & Diversity*

<sup>25</sup> *Rethinking America: The Practice and Politics of Multiculturalism In Higher Education* by Evelyn Hu-DeHart p. 24

<sup>26</sup> *Rethinking America: The Practice and Politics of Multiculturalism In Higher Education* by Evelyn Hu-DeHart p. 24

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dr. Gail Perez by Terisha Taylor on March 5, 2008

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Dr. Gail Perez by Terisha Taylor on March 5, 2008

overwhelming turnout, this peaceful protest rendered vastly different results from the “Walk of Consciousness.” Instead of yielding support in their efforts to raise awareness that the past had been repeating itself, the students were threatened with criminal charges, which silenced the voice of the students whom the university was supposed to be teaching how to be leaders, and increased tension in the campus climate.

The Ethnic Studies Program has come a long way since 1993. After hiring several distinguished activist professors, Dr. Jesse Mills and Dr. Michelle Jacob, into the program in 2006, there is no disputing that the program has exceeded all expectations of those who fought to obtain it. However, there is still a struggle for Ethnic Studies to become a recognized department.<sup>29</sup> In the near future, Alberto Pulido, Director of the Ethnic Studies Program, desperately wants to have an Asian-American faculty member among the team of Ethnic Studies professors. The lack of support from the administration has been, and continues to be, an ongoing battle, but despite all odds, the program has prevailed.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Dr. Alberto Pulido by Terisha Taylor on March 6, 2008

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Dr. Alberto Pulido by Terisha Taylor on March 6, 2008