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## A Student-initiated, Student-run, and Student-funded Center for Retaining Underrepresented Minority University Students

In 2014, the U.S. Education Department released its *Projections of Education Statistics to 2022* predicting that, between 2011 and 2022, Black and Hispanic enrollment growth in higher education will surge by 26 and 27 percent, respectively. Enrollment by American Indians and Alaskan Natives are projected to remain at the same level. Whites and Asian Americans enrollment is expected to increase 7-percent. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014051.pdf>

Past studies have reported that only about 45 percent of underrepresented students who entered four-year colleges as freshmen had received a bachelor degree six years later as compared to 57percent of other students (see reference list). While there are not good data on the dropout rate, best estimates are that most of the students who do not graduate within six years have or will dropout.

Our Center has resources that explore factors related to dropout and retention of underrepresented minorities (see the resource list). The purpose of this new resource is to complement what we have done previously by highlighting the innovative work of the Student Retention Center at UCLA.\*

### The Student Retention Center (SRC)

As described on its website, the Student Retention Center (SRC) is

“the first student-initiated, student-run, and student-funded retention center in the nation. Created through student activism, the SRC is the only student center on campus directly accountable to students. The projects and services within the SRC are designed to assist undergraduate students with academic difficulties and cultural and social transitions.”

<http://www.cpo.ucla.edu/src/>

The SRC administers services to over a thousand students.

There are five projects in the Student Retention Center that serve communities that historically have had low retention rates. Since 1969, the SRC has been funded through passage of student referendums. A Campus Retention Committee administers the funding, evaluates projects, oversees operations, and advocates to the university administration on issues relating to the retention of all students at UCLA.

Each project offers Peer Counseling and Mentorship services, and some offer additional services, such as Gender & Sexuality Counseling Wellness Programs, and Internship Programs to support students and ensure their access and eventual graduation. Besides the five projects, the SRC houses the campus’ program to help undergraduate students improve their writing skills and oversees additional retention services such as a Test Bank, a Computer Lab, a nightly Study Hall, a Commuter Van Ride Service, a Food Closet. The SRC also liaisons with representatives and counselors from campus-wide entities such as the Financial Aid Office, the Honors Program, and the Academic Advancement program.

To illustrate the work of the Student Retention Center, Maya Omuziligbo, an undergraduate working in our Center, focused in on two of the five projects: (1) the Academic Support Program (ASP) and (2) the Samahang Pilipino Education and Retention (SPEAR) project.

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\*The material in this document reflects work done by Maya Omuziligbo as part of her involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Email: [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu) Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## The Academic Support Program (ASP)

Estimates indicate that only 44% of black students at UCLA graduate within 4 years, and the rate of academic problems and dismissals among this group are higher than experienced by most other subgroups. Given this, the Afrikan Student Union established the Academic Support Program (ASP) as a retention project. ASP's intent is "to facilitate growth of students within the Afrikan diaspora" and enhance graduation rates. The program has 3 components: Peer Counseling, Mentorship, and Internship (see Exhibit 1).

### Exhibit 1

#### ASP Components

(as described at – <http://www.cpo.ucla.edu/src/academic-supports-program/> )

#### 1. *Nia Peer Counseling* — Purpose: One-on-One Peer Counseling to help students with:

- Academic Goal Planning
- Study Techniques
- Post-Grad Planning
- Financial Resources
- Personal Counseling
- Stress Management
- Professional Skills
- Time management
- Academic Counseling
- And much more!

The Peer Counseling approach is formatted to address the specific needs of any type of student. The peer counseling curriculum is aimed to help students become aware of on and off-campus resources, as well as, make long-term goals and plans to utilize them and challenge one's potential.

Peer counseling also provides a safe space for confidentiality and trust.

#### 2. *Ujima Mentorship* — Collective Work and Responsibility – ASP's Mentorship Program serves to connect all people of Afrikan descent in order to strengthen the campus community.

- Offers Mentors to Freshmen/Transfer students to be matched with upperclassmen with similar major and career interests.
- Offers Graduate Mentors to upperclassmen who are interested in similar career paths.
- Is fueled by the collective development of the Afrikan community of undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, and faculty by facilitating various social events that promote networking and sharing of resources.

#### 3. *Kujichagulia Internship* — Self Determination – ASP's Internship program is designed to prepare students for leadership positions within the Afrikan community at UCLA and beyond.

- Students receive 2.0 units of UCLA credit per quarter
- Students will receive leadership, professional, and personal development training
- Students will gain a general sense of Afrikan history @ UCLA
- Students will shadow a Harambee Council organization to gain a first hand look on exactly what a black student leader looks like at UCLA.

## **Samahang Pilipino Education and Retention (SPEAR)**

SPEAR was started to address the low retention rate of Pilipino students. SPEAR describes its mission as that of reaching 100% retention of UCLA students, particularly the Pilipino Community by providing individual and collective services for students that:

1. Promote critical thinking about themselves and their environment
2. Allow students to gain skills and opportunities to engage with the community inside and outside of the classroom
3. Encourage students to define, take ownership of, and pursue their education.

See Exhibit 2 for the project's major activities.

### Exhibit 2

#### **SPEAR Components**

( as described at <http://www.cpo.ucla.edu/src/samahang-pilipino-education-and-retention> )

#### **1. *Peer counseling***

It is important to note that SPEAR counselors are UCLA students as well. They understand what it means to be a Pilipino student on campus. In addition to utilizing their knowledge of academic policies to help you succeed, SPEAR counselors provide support and guidance for any other aspect of your life. They will present you with many opportunities for you to grow and develop. SPEAR counselors are a part of a community to help you progress towards your personal and academic goals.

Counselors (6 named)

#### **2. *One Step Ahead (OSA) Mentorship***

Students who join mentorship will be paired up with other students to help ease their transition into the university. OSA mentorship creates a space for the incoming students to expand their social network, build personal friendships with their mentor, and make the most out of their university experience.

#### **3. *Samahang Teaching Through Experience Program (STEP)***

Samahang Teaching through Experience Program (STEP) is different from your "average" internship. This internship program provides students an opportunity to advance their college experience by participating in education relevant to discovering more about their identity. By discussing history and current community conditions with a small group of students, you will not only be able to learn more about yourself, but also about other individuals within the different communities in our UCLA campus.

To obtain participant perspectives, Maya interviewed a representative undergraduate from each program. Both provided positive testimonials about their experiences (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3

**Maya's Interviews with Two Participants**

T.H. is a third year undergraduate student majoring in Economics. He is currently a member of the Academic Support Program (ASP).

*What inspired him to become a member of the ASP club?*

During his first year, he was having a hard time maneuvering through resources and trying to find help and did not have close ties with others on campus. He observed minority students who were members of cultural clubs and organizations. ASP looked like a place to get closer to people of his ethnic group. (Not having African American friends when he initially came to UCLA felt weird to him.)

*What happened when he went to sign up?*

He was assigned a peer counselor. She explained the purpose of the club as that of promoting 100% retention of black students by providing access to many resources and supports, and facilitating holistic development, self advocacy, and self learning.

*What has been the benefit to him?*

T.H. stressed that ASP “made his college experience easier” (e.g., providing academic resources, aided in signing up for classes). More generally, it served as a positive buffer as he pursued his academic experiences, and it surrounded him with other scholars from his ethnic group. This helped to create a sense of community for him. He believes that cultural clubs truly promote ethnic minority retention in higher education.

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C.E. is a second year undergraduate majoring in Pre Global Studies.

*What attracted her to SPEAR?*

She found it gave her a “home away from home.” Its services helped her academically, and her participation created a sense of belonging and enhanced her cultural consciousness and on-campus and general environmental awareness. And by encouraging development of a support system, friendships, and consciousness, it gave her a friendship group and support system. In particular, she stressed that she has learned a lot about community conditions in her ethnic group and about that of other minorities and wants to learn more.

*How does it fit into her sense of commitment?*

She stated that being part of the organization has broadened her outlook on life and about concerns beyond her own existence. She is committed to giving back to the campus Filipino community that gave her such a warm welcoming and feeling of belonging. To this end, she has furthered her involvement in the organization by taking on leadership roles as a counselor and coordinator. She feels as though she is contributing to a greater good.

In general, she believes cultural clubs help students analyze what is going on in their lives and in the ethnic community with which they are affiliated. She concludes that, having a sense of community when away from home and establishing a secondary family tie within the club pushes students to become even more motivated and resilient in their academic pursuit and promotes retention.

Maya's impression is that, in addition to stressing racial consciousness, academic excellence, and the creation of a sense of community for subgroups of students, the Student Retention Center's long-range goals are for underrepresented minority students to succeed beyond college and become role models. For some students, she believes this may make their ethnicity or race a major reason for striving for success.

Finally, it should be noted that researchers are focused on the role formal groups such as clubs and fraternities/sororities play in shaping personal identity and creating student subgroups. They report differences for underrepresented minorities and whites and have suggested the organization may contribute to the tendency for groups to segregate themselves on campus (see Exhibit 4).

#### Exhibit 4

##### **A Few Findings**

A study of social standard differences in black and white sororities found: "White sororities are structured to largely ignore the career message and concentrate on more traditional goal of pairing ('getting a man'), while black sororities are organized to facilitate economic self-sufficiency ('getting ahead') and to contribute to the betterment of the black community." The researchers viewed the differences as partly due to contrasting historical and structural realities that shaped black and white lives (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999).

The tendency for ethnic groups to segregate themselves "voluntarily" on campus by race may be inadvertently encouraged where racial and ethnic groups are a small percent of the enrollment, and this segregation has been associated with cultural clubs (Astin, 1993).

In general, students need to feel that their presence on campus is valued and wanted by significant others (e.g., peers, faculty, staff). Johnson (2007) found that when a campus lacks diversity, factors such as prejudice are more prevalent. This leads underrepresented minorities to feel they are devalued and unwanted and not part of the larger community. Research has indicated that race/ethnicity relates to students' sense of belonging. For example, African American students more than their white counterparts were found to report a sense of not belonging (e.g., Gilliard, 1996; Rachel Blog, 2015). All this undermines the commitment of some minority students to the institution and is associated with dropping out.

##### **Concluding Comments**

Given that underrepresented minorities have the lowest attendance and greatest dropout rates in higher education, the Student Retention Center provides an exemplar of projects that are attempting to reverse the trend. Such efforts, of course, are only one form of the multifaceted intervention package that is needed to ensure retention.

In the literature, retention is seen as grounded in students' success. From this perspective, retention interventions focus on providing an enriched environment of resources and activities that support academic and social integration into the college community, create a psychological sense of "fitting in," and enable successful pursuit of one's goals.

Concepts such as persistence, grit, resilience, and commitment to the institution are commonly referenced in discussing students who complete their degree objectives. And factors that are seen as positively and negatively affecting such attributes often are stressed in recommending what

needs to be done to enhance retention. Such factors include financial resources (e.g., SES is a major correlate of college success), personal readiness (in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes), and interpersonal and institutional conditions (e.g., the nature of family, peer, and faculty supports; racial prejudice, bias, microaggressions, and conflicts).

Addressing the many factors associated with retention requires a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of interventions. That system should begin pre-K and continue in a fully interconnected way through postsecondary graduation. The focus needs to be on enhancing equity of opportunity by promoting healthy development and addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The projected surge in Black and Hispanic enrollments in higher education reflect both hope and the need for improvements designed to enhance the ways schools create readiness for and support retention in postsecondary education. It is clear that there is considerable agreement about an array of factors that should be proactively addressed. The problem now is to develop, research, and establish policy for an effective system of student and learning supports.

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Also see the Center Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Transition to College* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm>