

'Ethnic spaces' make minority students feel at home on campus

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The Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center is named for Kelly, the founding vice president for minority affairs at the University of Washington and the university's first African American senior administrator. Credit: University of Washington

"Ethnic spaces" at U.S. universities make students from underrepresented minority groups feel a greater sense of belonging and engagement with their campus, new research suggests.

Many universities already have designated facilities, such as social areas and cultural centers, specifically for students of color. But at some institutions, such spaces and programs have fallen victim to budget cuts or controversy.

The new research with authors at the University of Washington and the University of Exeter in the U.K., aimed to test the value that [college students](#)—of many races—place on those facilities. For the research, hundreds of students at the UW campus in Seattle read about plans for their university to add either a new ethnic [space](#) or a general space. Among underrepresented minority students who participated in the study, reading about plans for an ethnic space led to stronger feelings of belonging, support and engagement in the university.

"This work is important because we know that students from ethnic minority groups can feel less belonging in institutions where they are underrepresented," said lead author Teri Kirby, senior lecturer at the University of Exeter.

"We need to understand how to make underrepresented students of color feel more welcome," she said. "Our research suggests that ethnic spaces are one good way to achieve this."

The study is published April 27 in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Of the top 26 universities on US News and World Report's undergraduate rankings for 2020, 18 mention having a space for underrepresented students of color.

At the UW, for example, the Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center opened in 1968. Over the years, it has been renovated and expanded and is now believed to be the largest college cultural center in the United States. The 26,000-square-foot building provides meeting spaces, a computer lab, a dance studio and other programming.

Other studies have shown that [organizations and institutions can increase](#) people's sense of belonging through materials, policies and programs that do not marginalize their identities, as well as physical space. UW psychology professor Sapna Cheryan, a co-author of the current study on ethnic spaces, previously led a study about the ways [computer science classrooms often appear unwelcoming to many women](#), potentially turning them away from the field.

In the current set of studies, the research team drew from the UW campus. Researchers asked 205 students from underrepresented minority groups—namely, African American, Latinx and Native American students—and 760 white students to read about plans for either an ethnic or a general student space, like a student union building. The research was divided into four separate studies, each presenting students with slightly different versions of plans for ethnic spaces or general student spaces.

Results showed that reading about a new ethnic space increased feelings of belonging among underrepresented students of color regardless of whether they intended to use it.

"This suggests the importance of these spaces is partly about the signal they send," said Kirby. "They are more than just gathering places—they show students from underrepresented ethnic groups that they are welcome at the university."

For white students, reading about ethnic spaces increased perceptions

that the university valued underrepresented students. However, these white students felt lower senses of belonging, support and campus engagement than [white students](#) who read about a general student space. The studies did not examine the cause of this difference, so it is unclear whether the general [student](#) center boosted their senses of belonging, support and engagement, whether the ethnic space reduced them, or both.

Overall, the studies underscore how even the idea of a space for students of color can boost their feelings of inclusion.

"Creating physical spaces for underrepresented students of color (and supporting those that already exist) is one powerful way to reduce academic disparities by signalling to underrepresented students that they are valued by the broader university," Cheryan said.

The study lends itself to further exploration, the authors said, such as the impact of ethnic spaces on specific groups, and whether the effects of ethnic spaces vary based on the degree of campus diversity.

Provided by University of Washington

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