

Chicana, Chicano studies has grown with UCLA

Now a full-fledged department, the field has developed through many years of student support

By [Neha Jaganathan](#)

Wednesday, November 26, 2008

When Carlos Manuel Haro stepped into the Rieber dining hall in 1965 and noticed that he was the only minority student, he was motivated to join a newly born cultural and academic movement which now puts UCLA in the position to be the third university in the country to offer master's and doctorate programs in Chicana and Chicano studies.

"Once you have an undergraduate major and graduate program, you can say the department has now fully arrived," said Alicia Gaspar de Alba, current chair of the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

Gaspar de Alba said that two weeks ago, the proposal for the graduate program cleared the first of many steps in the academic review process after being unanimously approved by the Faculty Executive Committee.

Haro, a postdoctoral scholar at the Chicano Studies Research Center, has been at UCLA since 1965 and said the academic field has come a long way since that time.

"Given that my initial introduction to UCLA was a sense of being a bit lonely ... where I could identify one or two (other Chicano students) as I walked around campus, that's a dramatic change to today."

But the birth of the César E. Chávez Department, as well as the creation of the Chicano Studies Research Center, was not without several challenges and obstacles, all of which were overcome by student activism.

In 1966, Haro attended the first ever meeting of Chicano students, which was organized after another undergraduate student manually sorted through information cards in Kerckhoff Hall to find individuals with Spanish last names.

Haro said the meeting, though only attended by 11 students, gave rise to the larger full-fledged organization United Mexican-American Students, which started in 1967.

"The organization, although initially one of social interaction, became much more important as we started to take on issues that were of concern," Haro said.

The organization began to focus on issues such as under-representation of minority groups on campus, mentoring support and increasing financial aid, Haro said.

Reynaldo Macias, currently the acting dean of the Department of Social Sciences, was also a student at UCLA in the late 1960s, and as a member of UMAS, was involved in the Chicana/o movement on campus.

Macias said the summer of '68 saw several meetings of planning- and agenda-setting committees, one of which resulted in what was then called the Mexican-American Research Center.

In particular, the research center was the result of an intra-university effort called the Plan de Santa Barbara, when students from several campuses met at UC Santa Barbara to lay the foundations for a research center, Haro said.

The research center, which was created in 1969, eventually led to the formation of an interdepartmental Chicana and Chicano studies program in 1973, according to the research center.

But the interdepartmental program had several deficiencies, Gaspar de Alba said.

In an interdepartmental program, faculty members have other primary commitments to the departments in which they were actually hired.

The interdepartmental program underwent significant change in 1993, when student protesting followed a refusal by Chancellor Young to grant full department status to Chicana and Chicano studies.

The protest involved a hunger strike and sit-in in May of 1993, during which time more than 90 students were arrested, according to the research center.

As a result of the hunger strike, Chancellor Young created the César Chávez Center in June of 1993, Gaspar de Alba said.

The Center acted as a quasi-department, able to perform most of the functions of a department without the legitimacy of the label, Gaspar de Alba said.

“It was an experiment by the administration to see whether (Chicana and Chicano) studies would hold up as an autonomous unit,” she said.

She furthered that this quasi-department faced a lot of initial challenges, including poor leadership and resistance from student organizations which wanted a different set of faculty members.

“It’s a phoenix department because it rose from the ashes of its previous incarnation.”

In June of 2005, Chicana and Chicano Studies officially became a department, Haro said.

“That was historical, not only because the administration was finally meeting the primary hunger strike agreement, but because we were fleshing out the vision of students in 1969,” Gaspar de Alba said.

But she said the department was originally named the Undergraduate Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies and only since 2007 has been known by its current name, the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

While most scholars agree that the field of Chicana and Chicano studies has come a long way in the last 50 years, they also feel that it still has many goals to accomplish.

“At the college level, programs have to expand. They are limited in terms of the number of students they can accept,” Hora said.