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Chancellor Block hosts 40th anniversary celebration for ethnic studies at UCLA

By **Letisia Marquez** | November 12, 2009



Chancellor Gene Block with guests.

Several generations of UCLA students, professors, administrators and supporters gathered Tuesday night to celebrate 40 years of ethnic studies at UCLA.

In 1969, UCLA won its fifth NCAA championship and a team of UCLA computer scientists sent the first-ever transmission over the Internet. The campus also created four ethnic studies centers.

"UCLA blazed a new trail by establishing centers in African American, Chicano, American Indian and Asian American studies, becoming one of the first universities in the nation to establish ethnic studies research centers," Chancellor Gene Block told nearly 400 people who attended a reception at his campus residence.

"Forty years after they were established, the centers are still innovating in a number of important ways," Block said.

The centers are vital to UCLA's role as a public research university serving a diverse state, and they enhance society's understanding of unique issues facing each of the four populations, he said. Block has designated the 2009-2010 school year as the Year of Ethnic Studies at UCLA.

Chancellor Emeritus Charles E. Young remembered the turbulent times in the 1960s that led to the center's formation.

On the heels of the nation's civil rights movements, a group of UCLA students and professors sought for the university to create academic spaces that would focus on the history and culture of underrepresented communities. Students Bunchy Carter and John Huggins, who were Black Panther Party members, were killed after a meeting to discuss who the director of the African American studies center would be.

But the UCLA community supported Young's preference to create research centers that would delve into understanding the issues as opposed to establishing academic departments.

"A lot of people thought: This is another one of Young's nutty ideas and it probably won't last very long," Young said. "But it's been forty years."

Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, vice chancellor of the graduate division, which oversees the centers, thanked the many former students, professors, staff, and supporters of ethnic studies in the audience.

"It's almost as though some great visionary saw into the future and took carefully measured steps to ensure that UCLA would have a place in this diverse world," she added.

The centers continue to publish renowned journals and important books, Mitchell-Kernan said. Their archives attract international scholars and support a wide range of research from the arts and humanities to the social sciences and public policy.

The night's program ended with poetry and drum music by John Densmore, The Doors' drummer who since 1991 has funded a scholarship program through the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies.

He recalled that as a teenager, he was influenced by the soulful music of such jazz greats as John Coltrane and Miles Davis.

"I want to give back to a culture that feeds me," he said.

More information on the centers' 40th anniversary can be found at <http://www.ethnicstudies40th.ucla.edu/>.

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