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Faculty hiring commitments are already building equity at UCLA

Scholars will work together to uplift Black, Latino, Indigenous and Pacific Islander communities



Jessica Wolf | August 10, 2022

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It was June 2020.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets protesting police violence against Black people in the wake of George Floyd's murder. The uprising forced institutions across the country to reckon with a national history of systemic racism.

At UCLA, numerous stakeholders insisted that the university do more to protect Black life and advance Black scholarship. Among them, the African American studies department and the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies spurred the adoption of a series of initiatives, one of which created 10 new faculty lines devoted to scholars with expertise in the study of Black life. With matching commitments from most departments, these 10 lines will ultimately be leveraged to hire up to 20 new faculty members.

Housed at the Bunche Center but loaned to departments across campus, these lines are now bringing to UCLA an exciting generation of scholars committed to the study of Black life. To date, UCLA has already welcomed seven new faculty — Sean Darling Hammond (biostatistics and community health sciences), Tierra Bills (civil and environmental engineering and public policy), Alisa Bierria (gender studies), David Turner (social welfare), Fanna Gamal (law), Lydia Daboussi (neurobiology) and Kacie Deters (life sciences).

Another search in anthropology is nearly complete. Three additional searches have been approved for the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, the division of life sciences and the UCLA Samueli School of Engineering.

"There is still more work to do to address the core issues that sparked the uprising for Black life, but with these new hires, we are making progress at strengthening the ecosystem for Black study at UCLA," said Kelly Lytle Hernández, director of the Bunche Center and the Thomas E. Lifka Professor of History.

Alongside Marcus Hunter, then chair of the African American studies department, Lytle Hernández met with campus administrators to secure these new faculty lines. Serving as the interim director of the Bunche Center in the 2021 academic year, Lorrie Frasure, associate professor of political science, led the effort to develop the infrastructure for equitably awarding the new lines, interviewing candidates, and hiring new faculty members.

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“This vision and our collective efforts followed a tradition and practice long established by Black faculty at UCLA, who have pushed the university to provide lasting institutional support toward the study of Black life and the Black community,” Frasure said.

Building on this initiative, UCLA is also expanding the number of faculty dedicated to American Indian, Pacific Islander and Latino studies.

The Institute of American Cultures plays an important role

Most of these faculty appointments will be held in the four ethnic studies centers that make up the Institute of American Cultures, which means they will be permanently committed to these areas of study.

“It is important to recognize that these new positions build upon the foundation and structure of ethnic studies center faculty lines with the Institute of American Cultures that have been a proven resource to help diversify UCLA’s faculty since the 1970s,” said David Yoo, vice provost of the Institute of American Cultures.

Most recently announced is the Native American and Pacific Islander Bruins Rising initiative, which will support the hiring of at least eight new faculty, with two searches launching in the 2022–23 school year.

The faculty positions for those with expertise in Native and Indigenous scholarship will be important for establishing UCLA’s American Indian Studies program as a full department within the social sciences this year, said Shannon Speed (Chickasaw), director of the American Indian Studies Center.

One goal is to seek incoming faculty for the American Indian Studies department who can eventually move into campus leadership positions, said Speed, a professor of anthropology and gender studies who was recently named special advisor to the chancellor on Native American and Indigenous affairs alongside Angela Riley from UCLA School of Law.

The Bruins Rising initiative will more than double the number of professors whose teaching and research focuses on Pacific Islanders, from three to seven — an important start, said Keith Camacho, a Chamorro historian from the Mariana Islands and an associate professor of Asian American studies. Los Angeles is home to the largest number of Pacific Islanders outside of Hawaii.

“This landmark initiative will ensure that future generations of American Indian and Pacific Islander students, staff and faculty can continue to thrive at UCLA and beyond,” Camacho said.

As Bruins Rising was taking shape, Speed and Karen Umemoto, professor of urban planning and Asian American studies, initiated a monthly gathering of Native American, Asian American and Pacific Islander staff, faculty and students to discuss needs, objectives and create a sense of solidarity.

“We serve so many communities, and for us at the Asian American Studies Center we’ve long been working to address the fact that the Pacific Islander community is the most underserved on campus,” said Umemoto, the Helen and Morgan Chu Endowed Director’s Chair of the Asian American Studies Center.

It’s an area where UCLA has great promise because of the talented faculty already here, Umemoto said. These include Camacho, who recently was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, Randall Akee, associate professor of public policy and American Indian studies (currently on leave serving as an economic advisor to President Biden) and Juliann Anesi, assistant professor of gender studies and disability studies.

“There is potential for UCLA to become a major destination for the study of Pacific Islanders in the continental United States,” Umemoto said.

Looking forward to UCLA becoming a Hispanic Serving Institution

Against the backdrop of this ongoing campus-community organizing, Veronica Terriquez joined UCLA as director of the Chicano Studies Research Center in 2021, just a few months before UCLA announced it would take steps to be recognized as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, or HSI. The Chicano Studies Research Center is a key player in the HSI effort and will be home to 15 new faculty lines to be hired over the next seven years for individuals whose teaching, scholarship and/or mentoring has ties to Latino experiences. Deans of schools and divisions may match these appointments for a total of up to 30 new scholars.

The first round of HSI faculty searches will happen in engineering, statistics, psychology, social welfare, gender studies, English, political science and interdisciplinary neuroscience.

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“Chancellor Block and the executive vice chancellor and provost’s office have entrusted the faculty with contributing to the direction of this institution by allowing us to help define how these investments are administered,” said Terriquez, who holds a dual appointment as a professor at the Luskin School of Public Affairs and in the Chicano/a and Central American studies department.

Terriquez is eager to see UCLA support scholars in science, technology, engineering and math whose academic work has ties to Latino experiences.

“Having faculty lines devoted to south campus can potentially pave the way for UCLA to become the top institution nationally for STEM scholars who are committed to Latinx students and communities,” she said.

This will have a huge impact on UCLA’s ability to serve the needs, and accommodate the growth in numbers, of UCLA students from Hispanic/Latino communities, said César Oyervides-Cisneros, senior administrator of campus initiatives at the Chicano Studies Research Center. One of the eligibility requirements to achieve the HSI designation includes having an undergraduate student body composed of at least 25% Hispanic students.

“It all weaves together,” Oyervides-Cisneros said. “The new HSI faculty hires are an important aspect of developing UCLA’s HSI infrastructure. They will enhance UCLA’s efforts to build a sense of community and belonging among students and faculty members in various academic fields and supporting mentorship capacity.”

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