

A Black Cultural Center at the University of

By Debbie Baker
Contributor

African-American college students historically have fought to survive economically and socially at our nation's predominantly-white universities. Students of african descent have had a difficult time feeling welcome and comfortable at some of most prestigious institutions of higher education in the U.S. Traditionally, predominantly-white institutions have employed few african-american faculty members. Consequently, black students lack role models and mentors to counsel them throughout their college years. In addition, many college courses "whitewash" history and downplay the positive contributions made to american society by persons of color. These historical omissions play a great role in perpetuating racial stereotypes and fueling tensions between the races. However, dozens of predominantly-white colleges and universities have built Black Cultural Centers (BCCs) to educate people about the importance of african-american history and culture.

Dozens except UNC.

For all UNC students of african descent, a Black Cultural Center is nothing more than a dream; a dream deferred. A dream that was first visualized over half a decade ago. A dream delayed by red tape and excuses time and time again. A dream of a place for the BSM to meet, the Gospel Choir to sing, the Ebony Readers to perform—where black students can come just to relax.

It's definitely just a dream...

"The Rise of the BCCs"

Several Black Cultural Centers were built around 1968 towards the end of the civil rights movement. Around 1968, the black power phase of the movement emerged as African-Americans began to demand political and economic power. The demand for BCCs was a direct result of the sentiments felt during the black power struggle. The Afro-American studies departments also developed during this period at the nation's predominantly-white universities. As black students learned about their history, a need arose for a permanent place to educate others about african-american culture. However, other hidden factors led to the rise of the nation's BCCs, according to Margo Crawford, UNC's BCC director.

"In those early stages of Afro-American studies departments, the assumption was that the black faculty would take care of all the needs of black students. And black faculty actually did for awhile, but what happened was that these same black faculty were not keeping up with their research. So you have a lot of them who weren't getting tenure as universities were loading them up with all these tasks. As a result, black faculty members started leaving in order to find other jobs."

As more black faculty left, black students at predominantly-white universities began to work to have BCCs built in order to attract more black students and faculty. BCCs have become very

successful at about 120 universities in the nation, according to the National Association of BCCs. The University of Purdue built its BCC 21 years ago in 1969. Other universities with successful BCCs are Ohio St., Rutgers and Brown.

It would seem that UNC would follow the lead of other universities, but maybe not.

Beginning of a BCC at UNC

During the early 1980's, black students at UNC led by the Black Student Movement (BSM), began to petition for a Black Cultural Center. Everyone seemed to want a BCC, but no one could develop a working definition of a black cultural center nor determine its feasibility. Some persons on campus felt a BCC would conflict with the work the BSM. In 1984, Donald Bolton, vice chancellor and dean of student affairs, appointed a "steering" committee to work on a proposal for a BCC. The committee consisted of alumni, students, faculty and staff members at UNC.

Dr. Trudier Harris, chairman of the African and Afro-American studies department, served on the original steering committee.

"A lot of us were very actively involved. Our job was to conceptualize a BCC at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The committee was a total representation of the diversity of the campus."

Hayden Renwick, a former associate dean in the College of Art and Sciences, did not support the committee's efforts.

"I refused to participate on the committee because I knew that the administration was lying—and that it never intended to give them (black students) a BCC. You've got to understand that the administration had been lying to black students for years."

Each committee member draft a proposal of his visualization of a BCC during the summer of 1985. A final proposal was to be submitted to Bolton for his approval. Bolton was then to proceed with plans to establish a BCC.

A Slow, Slow Process

In 1986, after 21 months of gathering information, the steering committee still had not finished its proposal. Rumors surfaced that mistrust existed between the steering committee and

the Division of student Affairs. Some committee members felt that student affairs was intentionally letting the process drag along hoping people would loose interest. The committee met on Jan. 24, 1986 to finalize its proposal. Dr Harris said the BCC was envisioned by the committee as a permanent site for the study and preservation of black culture.

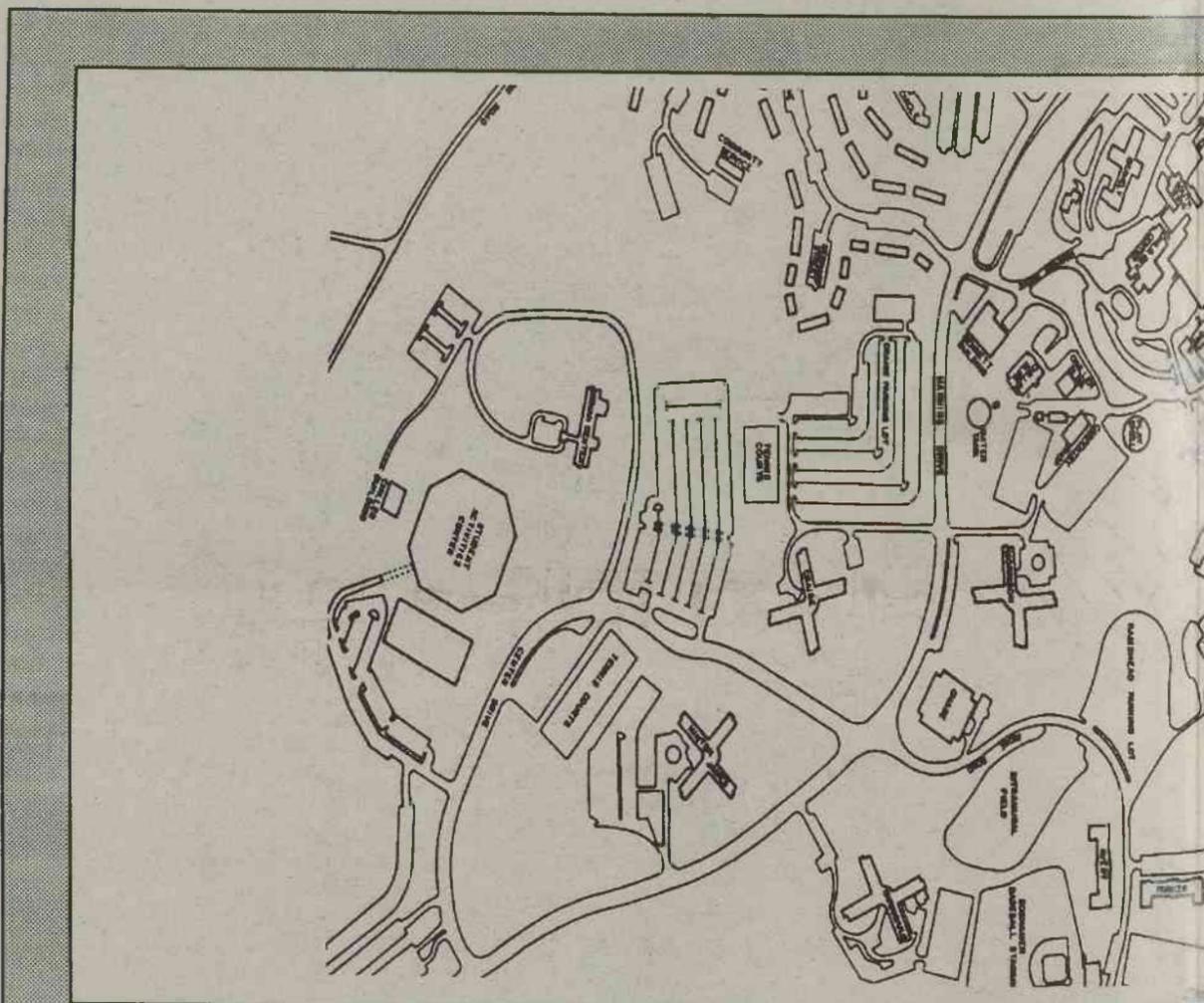
"It (the BCC) was conceptualized as a building in which there could be a number of things. We envisioned space for a library on Afri-

site because there was no other space. So in other words, you had people (the steering committee) assigned to go off to create a BCC, when there was no place to put it."

With only a corner in the Student Union, it was time to find a director.

A New Leader Arrives

Edith Wiggins coordinated a search committee to find a director for the BCC. Margo Crawford, a native of Chicago, was selected from among 60



"...Dozens of predominantly-white cultural Centers to educate people about the and culture...Dozens except the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

can-American culture; we envisioned a performing arts center; we envisioned office space sufficient enough to have various artists reside; we envisioned any number of things."

A small space in the Student Union was set aside for the BCC's temporary site. The space was not nearly as large as black students needed or wanted. Yet they had no choice. Edith Wiggins, associate vice chancellor and dean of student affairs, has worked on the BCC project since the beginning. She served as chairman of the original steering committee.

"There is a university process that everyone is supposed to use when it comes to the allocation of space. The space was accepted as a temporary

applicant. She had worked as an Assistant Professor of Afro-American studies and as a housing coordinator in Chicago. She assumed her job July 1, 1988.

Margo Crawford believes UNC needs a BCC. "I don't know of any predominantly-white university that doesn't need a BCC. I don't think you need a BCC if you can demonstrate that your curriculum and academic programming are multicultural—that is reflecting the cultures of others. However, that doesn't happen at most predominantly-white institutions."

The BCC has four primary program areas designed to raise awareness levels as well as consciousness about black culture. The lecture series brings in black scholars and speakers to