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# Middle East, North Africa, South Asia Initiative Report

Portland State University. Cultural Resource Centers

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# Middle East, North Africa, South Asia Initiative Report

Cultural Resource Centers, Portland State University



Portland State  
Cultural Resource Centers



Diversity & Multicultural  
Student Services

Middle East, North Africa, South Asia Initiative Report  
Cultural Resource Centers  
Diversity & Multicultural Student Center  
Portland State University  
2019

*Prepared for:*

Portland State University students, faculty, staff, and community stakeholders.

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## **Introduction**

The Middle East, North Africa, South Asia (MENASA) Initiative was created to address a lack of resources and services to support the MENASA student population at Portland State University (PSU). Formed by a group of undergraduate and graduate MENASA students, and supported administratively by the Cultural Resource Centers, the MENASA Initiative is a student-centered effort with the goal of creating a MENASA Student Center to match the other five Cultural Resource Centers (La Casa Latina Student Center, the Multicultural Student Center, the Native American Student and Community Center, the Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American Student Center, and the Pan-African Commons).

Since its inception as the Vanport Extension Center (VEC) in 1946, the school now known as Portland State University has provided opportunities to underrepresented communities in higher education. VEC actively encouraged enrollment of nontraditional students, including veterans, women with children, first-generation college students, and students of color. PSU continues to recognize the unique challenges these students face while achieving academic goals.

Students of color encounter unique barriers in higher education (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Services to support their student persistence are an important component of a university and cultural spaces represent an example of how an institution can support the co-curricular needs of its students (Ladson-Billings, 2012.) Alexander Astin (1993) found the critical impact college environments have on undergraduate student persistence when he noted that cultural workshops in cultural centers increased students' feeling of personal empowerment and were connected to increased student persistence rates.

In *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice* (2012), the authors highlighted the existence of cultural centers as counter spaces, offering students of color safe havens on college campuses that are often rooted in their exclusion. Culturally specific services, community involvement, and resources help students achieve academic success and contribute to higher student persistence rates. As a co-curricular resource the Cultural Resource Centers at PSU strive to incorporate student-centered ideologies into their mission. The Cultural Resource Centers recognize those ideologies often pivot on the acknowledgement of students' marginalized identities and unique challenges as scholars in an urban, public institution of higher learning.

## **History**

This report documents the MENASA Initiative's growth and progress, highlighting the depth and breadth of the influence of cultural centers on our campus. The initiative's events and activities attracted students who never visited Smith Memorial Student Union and were not connected to campus life. It helped students feel safe and build community supporting their active connection to PSU. In testimonials collected by the Initiative, one MENASA student stated, "the MENASA Initiative's activities and events are making me feel welcomed and I feel supported because for the first time in my life my ethnicity and my culture is celebrated." (Maha Alameri). Our work focuses on student persistence, creating supportive and meaningful community connections and fostering authentic environments for coalition building. (Gathering Space, Building Community, 2017 pg. 2)

## **Existing Resources**

The resources at Portland State University that represent the MENASA region are minimal. One existing resource is the Middle East Studies Center (MESC) that focuses on Middle East academia and connecting students to scholarships. Also, some students engage the campus through the Student Activities and Leadership Program (SALP) which sponsors many affinity group organizations. Many MENASA students feel, however, that student organizations should not be the only consistent resource for the MENASA community and that there exists a lack of formal support for the student population.

Dana Ghazi, former student body President, shared some of her experiences as a student leader stating, "We didn't have a clear understanding of PSU's system, and there was no support or a resource to help us as students to know our rights." Practical models of student persistence support the common premise that persistence is a function of a student's fit with the institutional environment. Student persistence models argue that the fit, or match, is evident in a student's interactions with the institution's academic and social systems, and the many factors that affect those interactions. Those factors that enhance college persistence include an ethic of care, participation in college-sponsored activities, an emphasis on support services, and a peer culture where close on-campus friendships are developed." (Patton, 2010 Pg. 5)

Portland State University lacks a dedicated full time staff member who can address and provide responsive support to issues of academic persistence for the MENASA student community. Wafaa Almakari, a student from the MENASA region who leads the Initiative, shared her experiences as an immigrant from Yemen at a PSU event. Wafa talked about being a civilian who survived living in a war zone country, then moving to a country that discriminated against her due to a piece of cloth that she wears on her head. However, the professional staff who facilitated the event did not set boundaries or create safe conditions for students in the

discussion. Following her disclosure, another student spoke over her, asserting that, “the US bombing Yemen is the right thing to do,” and her speaking time turned into a debate.

Wafaa believes a lack of proper training and facilitation contributed to the severity of this incident as the verbal attack went uninterrupted. Wafaa further indicated that a lack of understanding of being a person of color or accurate knowledge regarding the MENASA region also played a role in how the incident occurred. A staff member dedicated to student persistence efforts for MENASA students could have made an appropriate intervention, allowing Wafaa the speaking time she feels that she deserved.

### **Purpose and Vision**

The Initiative’s vision is to create a MENASA student center, hire a full time Coordinator, and hire a team of students. The Initiative focuses on MENASA students’ cultures, and would fall under the CRCs. Neither the center, nor team would seek to promote a single religion, but rather focus on embracing the full beauty and breadth of the MENASA cultures. The Initiative focuses on connecting MENASA students with resources on campus and assist with identity development. The Initiative also focuses on building bridges with community and organizations to create new collaborations that serve as a resource for the MENASA community.

Executive Order 13780 (Officially titled “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States”) was published on March 9, 2017. Subsequently, Presidential Proclamation 9645 (widely referred to as a “Travel Ban”) was signed on September 24, 2017. Reaction to these two policies by students from the MENASA region included, “feeling attacked.” The current political climate is challenging partially because people from five MENASA countries are currently banned from entering the U.S. These policies also lead many students from MENASA countries to feel excluded and unwelcomed.

It is envisioned that the Program Coordinator for the MENASA Student Center would strengthen advocacy efforts for MENASA students and lessen the workload of other professional staff in the CRCs allowing them to direct their work to other issues related to the CRCs. It is imperative that the institution provide a support system that will help these students from underrepresented group succeed. A MENASA center will help students find a place that looks like home, and will help them build community.

Student testimonies were solicited for the Initiative, and one student from Yemen (one of the banned countries) stated, “I feel like I don't belong and I feel so heavy living in a country that has banned my country and my people.” Accordingly, it is possible that because of historic, structural, and institutional racism, that although racial/ethnic minority students may participate



in the social and academic life of an institution, they may not feel a sense of belonging or integration in the life of the institution. (Patton, 2010 pg.6). MENASA students lack representation in dominant campus culture, and other students from underrepresented populations in higher education may have a different understanding of integration (Patton, 2010 pg. 7).

While multicultural articles, books, and curriculum teaching units may deal with the heritage of African American, Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific American cultures, they often neglect the cultures within the MENASA regions. A lack of proper instructional support for MENASA students leads to more students getting lost in the school system and not fitting within any category (Wingfield & Karaman). The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) researched history and geography textbooks, and found an over-portrayal of deserts, camels and nomads in the chapter on the Middle East.

It has been documented that well-intended teachers use the Bedouin image to describe populations from this region, which simplifies Arab culture. Only about 2% of Arabs are traditional Bedouin, and today there are probably more Arab engineers and computer specialists than desert dwellers. American textbooks are often Eurocentric, portray a narrative of nationalization of resources, or present the Arab-Israeli conflict inadequately (Barlow, 1994, p.vii) . Programming at the MENASA Student Center would seek to curb and correct these stereotypes and provide a positive forum through which students can engage. It is also hoped that internal healing will be accomplished between students from the region.

### **Data/ Numbers/Statistical Analysis**

Finding numbers and statistics that show the total number of MENASA students at PSU is challenging due to the lack of a MENASA ethnicity/race box on enrollment forms. Currently, some MENASA students interviewed check “white” as their ethnicity/race due to a lack of adequately disaggregated choices. The only data available that approximates the number of MENASA students is found within the Office of International Student Services, but that, problematically, excludes MENASA domestic students. On PSU’s website the only ethnicities that are captured are: “White: 56.6%, Asian: 8.4%, Latino: 12.5%, International: 7.0%, African American: 3.3%, Native American: 1.2%, Multi-Ethnic: 6.0%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: .06%, Other: 4.6%” (PSU Profile - 2017) .

### **Development Process:**

The Initiative successfully held listening sessions and reached out to MENASA students, community, and many allies. Testimonials were collected to capture student needs, and a petition was circulated to show student and faculty support for the creation of a MENASA

center. The intent is for the future resource center to help support MENASA students, help PSU embrace its value of diversity, and provide students opportunities to overcome stereotypes about the region. Development of a safe space creates a fostering environment for students who come from marginalized communities and provides cultural exposure for many students. Additionally, many studies have shown a positive correlation of social, cognitive, and cultural development by exposing white students to different races/ethnicities (Patton, 2010).

The current political climate is alarming to the majority of the MENASA students, and affects their performance and engagement in school. MENASA students feel verbally and politically attacked by the President of the United States, and view those attacks as a vehicle for hate towards the MENASA community. Prejudice and discrimination against MENASA Americans is often rooted in negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. Individual MENASA Americans are associated with or blamed for the acts of small groups of extremists who may or may not share their ethnicity or religion (Wingfield & Karaman). The MENASA Initiative disrupts negative stereotypes, and works to replace them with an in-depth understanding of the region's history and advocacy to appreciate the lives and cultural background of the MENASA students.

### **Student-Centered Voice**

Creation of the MENASA Student Center is a response to student voices. Students have played an important and powerful role in the creation of all the PSU Cultural Resource Centers (Gathering Space, Building Community, 2017, p. 7). The following concerns expressed by students were collected at the MENASA Winter Listening Session in 2018 and show the need for a MENASA Student Center:

- MENASA student identity is not represented in the leadership positions on campus.
- MENASA students feel attacked by the president of the country, and not welcomed.
- In the classroom some students and faculty share ignorant stereotypical comments about the MENASA community and there lacks a support system to reach out to when navigating such challenges.
- The MENASA students have been underrepresented and are voiceless when it comes to allocation of resources and ethnicity celebration.
- Faculty and learning resource centers do not provide the needed support to MENASA region second language-learning speakers, leading students to feel left out.
- Staff and faculty are not well trained to navigate uncomfortable conversations in class resulting in MENASA students getting offended and hurt by ignorant comments.

## **Mission Statement**

The MENASA Student Center cultivates cultural, personal, academic, and professional development and opportunities through programming and resources that foster empowerment, enrichment, and principled solidarity that advocates for people of the MENASA diaspora. All students are welcome.

## **Timeline**

Summer 2016 - *The creation of a MENASA student center is first mentioned in the Cultural Resource Center Strategic Plan. .*

Summer 2017 - *Cultural Resource Centers Advisory Council (CRCAC) officially adds 'starting MENASA Initiative' to the Cultural Resource Centers Strategic Plan. (The CRCAC is a voting body that consists of PSU students, staff, faculty, and community members.)*

Fall 2017 - *Cultural Resource Centers hire a MENASA Initiative Student Assistant. Wafaa Almaktari, was hired to provide student leadership to the ongoing MENASA Initiative efforts. (The MENASA region encompasses over 30 countries. The concept was developed in 2015 by the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). PSU students adopted the NASPA academic framework to help promote the needs of the MENASA region diaspora on campus.)*

November 13, 2017 - *MENASA Fall Community Dinner. Dinner gathering of MENASA student leaders identified to support MENASA Initiative efforts held at the Pan-African Commons.*

March 8, 2018 - *MENASA Initiative hosts its first Listening Session*  
Led by MENASA student leaders, a listening session was facilitated to gather MENASA student feedback about what resources they would like the CRCs to develop.

May 21, 2018 - *The MENASA initiative presents to the SMSU Advisory Board informing them about the initiative and the goal of opening a center. A memo was created to inform stakeholders about the initiative and the updates of the work that has been implemented.*

May 23, 2018 - *MENASA End of Year Celebration.*

Summer 2018 - *Planned for Fall and winter activities.*

Fall 2018 - *Began Feasibility study work*, the initiative presented to the SFC Budget asking ask for a budget to hire a MENASA full time coordinator.

Winter 2019 - The SFC approved the budget request.

March 3, 2019 - MENASA Initiative Winter Event celebrates community with Middle Eastern food, North African coffee, and South Asian Chai.

May 13, 2019 - The MENASA Initiative Students address the PSU Board of Directors meeting.

Spring 2019 - President Shoureshi signs the budget.

Spring 2019 - The Initiative submitted a SMSU Space Request successfully.

May 30, 2019 - MENASA Initiative wins a President's Diversity Award in the category for "Distinguished Team."

October 15, 2019 - The MENASA Student Programming Team held a welcome back gathering to introduce the MENASA Initiative to new students. Students also had the opportunity to sign a petition in support of expanding the Cultural Resource Centers space in Smith Memorial Student Union to accomodate a MENASA Student Center.

October 29, 30, 31, 2019 - *Program Coordinator Candidate Interviews*

The Cultural Resource Centers interviewed three candidates for the MENASA Program Coordinator position. PSU students, staff, and faculty attended the candidates' presentations and provided feedback to CRC professional staff members.

October 30, 2019 - *MENASA Initiative presents to the SMSU Advisory Board Part 1.*

November 13, 2019 - *MENASA Initiative presents to the SMSU Advisory Board Part 2.*

November 19, 2019 - *MENASA Initiative budget increased*

The Student Fee Committee approved a Cultural Resource Centers budget increase request for the MENASA Initiative as we anticipate opening a physical space in the near future.

November 25, 2019 - *MENASA Initiative hires a Program Coordinator*

Ahmed El Mansouri, the inaugural MENASA Initiative Program Coordinator joins the Cultural Resource Centers team.

December 17, 2019 - *MENASA Initiative presents to PSU Space Advisory Committee*

The Cultural Resource Center proposal to expand the physical space of the Cultural Resource Centers to include a MENASA Student Center is reviewed by the university-wide Space Allocation Committee.

### **Ongoing Complexities**

According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) the countries in the MENASA region are: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Djibouti, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgys Republic, Lebanon, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. These countries have widely different cultural norms, traditions, and languages.

Much of the MENASA region suffers from political conflict. Most of these countries are not located in the same geographic area, and the assumption that this is a miopic region is false. Additionally, the aforementioned ongoing conflicts will need to be addressed in the programming efforts of the future MENASA team. Developing programming events that fairly address the issues of a large and diverse region, given the limited resources, will be challenging.

### **Next Steps**

- 1) Fall 2019, Using program funds allocated by the Student Fee Committee, hire a full-time MENASA Initiative Program Coordinator and two MENASA Initiative Programming Team students.
- 2) Establish the process by which the MENASA Student Center will be developed. This includes setting group norms, selecting a name for the center, and writing a mission statement.
- 3) Identify a physical space for the MENASA Student Center with the goal that the center will open by 2021 in confluence with the Cultural Resource Center's Strategic Plan.

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