

In 2011, Circe Strum, as co-chair of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative, asked the College of Liberal Arts to dedicate a space on campus for the program. Native American students also have been asking for a separate space for at least seven years, she said

But while the University of Texas at Austin offers many resources for communities to connect, it does not have a center for Native American and Indigenous studies.

Other colleges such as the University of Colorado at Boulder, Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, and Colorado State University in Fort Collins have centers for Native American and Indigenous studies. UT does have centers for African and African American studies as well as Asian and Asian American studies.

Centers like these are considered an “ethnic space,” which allows students within that ethnicity to feel more at home on campus. They also provide resources for research and education. A Native American and Indigenous studies center would provide an area for the entire program to work in as well as a meeting hub for organizations such as the Native American and Indigenous Collective.

Sturm said that the space given to the Initiative in 2011 was accommodated inside the RLP building at the time.

A new center could be provided through being a floor within a building, or paid for and then built.

The annual budget for the university is roughly \$3 billion, according to the UT Budget Office.

The office reports that 11% of the funding they receive is from state support, 12% is from state endowment and another 18% comes from grants and contracts. The rest of the budget comes from tuition, donations and other sources.

However, only 1% of the UT student population is Native American, according to the college’s most recent facts and figures from fall 2020.

First-year student Raven Price-Smith, who is also an officer in the Native American and Indigenous Collective, said that she worries there may not be enough students or NAIS majors to justify a new center.

“Definitely the biggest challenge I would say to make a space like this happen is that our population is too small to even be concerned,” Price-Smith said.

However, Sturm said the problem isn't necessarily that there is too small of a Native American population at the school. Texas has the fifth largest body of Native Americans in the U.S and the problem is that they aren't being served, Sturm said.

“What’s happening politically versus what the reality is, is a long historical process of erasure,” Sturm said.

Sturm said that there is a problem with visibility in the state government which then affects the college. She said that there have been times Native American caucuses in the state government have come and gone but typically the only representatives are those that come from the federally recognized tribes and state recognized tribes.

Sturm said that there is an assumption that if UT granted fellowships, such as grants or scholarships for Native Americans, they wouldn't be claimed.

When it comes to diversity, Sturm said, there is a presumption that “Texas is just looking to Latin America but not specifically to indigeneity or ignoring the facts that there are American Indians on this land base.”

Native American students often feel like it's hard to find others within their culture on campus, Price-Smith said.

Price-Smith said that she assumed many Native American students would try to join NAIC with a desire to be around other Native American students since that is something that she wanted.

“I haven't actually met that many. I've met maybe three or four,” she said.

A center may also help better connect students so they feel less isolated and are able to be around their community and culture.

If a center was created, Sturm said that outreach programs into Indian country, reservations or tribal communities for Native American students could be more easily made a reality and could increase the number of such students at UT.

“When that happens, it's effective,” said Sturm. “I know there are efforts to start working on that with admissions, there is energy going into that.”

