How Space Matters:
Reflections from a Student Inquiry Project on Race, Space, & the PCC Landscape

Space Matters was a student inquiry project and part of an innovative critical race theory (CRT) initiative in Facilities Planning at Portland Community College (PCC). During winter term 2018, as part of a "discovery" phase in planning, PCC students of color spent five weeks exploring dimensions of race, space, and educational settings, to reveal new insights and examine critical questions about inclusion.

As participants in this project, we invite PCC staff in Facilities Planning, educational leaders, architectural design consultants, and other stakeholders to consider the following reflections when conceiving and designing educational space. These insights emerged from our collective lived experiences as students of color, spatial field notes we collected, and a student survey we conducted across PCC campuses.

As an inquiry project designed to explore, our insights and questions invite more questions and the need for further research. Moving forward, we recommend opportunities for student-led research. We hope to be able to continue this important work in order to further benefit the experiences of students of color at PCC specifically and in academic spaces in general.

Reflections: Lived Experience

- Knowledge-building is a collaborative effort.
- The perceptions of people of color regarding race and space, while valid, are often not considered.
- While some patterns emerged, students of color were not homogenous in their responses to questions regarding space.
- There is a lack of education about CRT among PCC community members.
- People of color are more complex than just our racial and ethnic identities.
- People of color are under-represented in PCC spaces, curriculum, artwork, faculty, administration, and other dimensions of educational environments.
- When conceptualizing campus spaces there are opportunities to create platforms where dominant narratives, that perpetuate historical injustices, can be addressed through design.
- White supremacy prevails in society through norms, traditions, and beliefs that manifest in built environments, dissolving the integrity of humanity.
- A colorful space does not necessarily communicate an inclusive environment to people of color.
- Normative built environments reinforce and conceal "the white gaze," which alienates some students of color from PCC spaces, and inhibits the confidence to engage fully in learning experiences without self-censorship.

Questions to Consider...
- How will you amplify the voices of people most affected by inequity so their concerns are implemented in campus design?
- How have stakeholders studied and practiced critical race theory?
- How does the diversity of stakeholders reflect the PCC student body?
- How will the environments you create condition the people that inhabit and travel PCC campuses?
- How might design maintain or disrupt the status quo?
- How do the interests and experiences of stakeholders inform design decisions?

Reflections: Spatial Field Notes

- Challenging the status quo and disrupting dominant narratives requires innovation.
- Students of color should participate in all stages of the design process for PCC spaces.
- Space invokes feelings according to lived experience, which shapes our approach to social interactions; this illuminates a major concern for design, especially in educational settings.
- There are places with resources for "marginalized" people but they are out of the way and inconvenient; personal adherence to internalized narratives can cause negative feelings about asking for help and discourages some students of color from seeking out and accessing resources.
- Students of color are eager to be part of the planning process, but lack the institutional power and tools to improve the conditions we critique.
- If the point of design is to facilitate human life and human life is centered around connection, then good design ought to provide channels for humans to connect.
- Planning can frequently follow a linear trajectory and emphasize binary thinking; CRT re-directs this focus towards non-linear narratives and life-stories, which can lead to a more organic design process.
- Spaces that promote a common sense of belonging and empathy may support engagement in uncomfortable but necessary conversations to understand our differences and further cooperative learning.

Questions to Consider...
- How might rationales for spatial arrangements, such as efficiency and safety, reproduce racial inequities in built environments?
- How do built environments provide points of connection and access to resources for community college students who spend limited time on campus beyond classes?
- How will the spatial arrangements of material objects within built environments that you plan invite holistic human relationships and subvert systemic barriers to equity over time?

Reflections: Student Survey

On conducting surveys on space:

- We found the survey difficult to plan, design, and execute comprehensively due to time and resource constraints.
- As an informal inquiry project much of what we learned is inconclusive.
- Participant awareness of terminology regarding spatial categories was a barrier to responses.
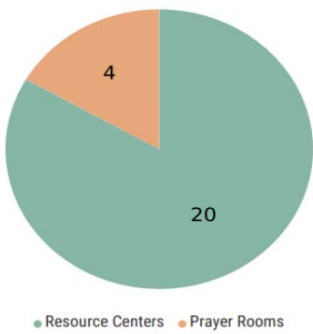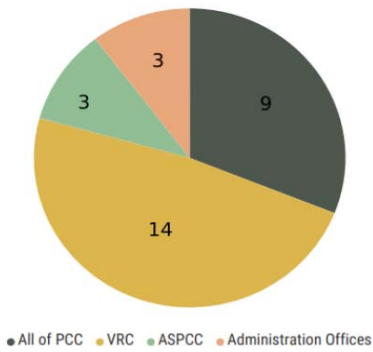- Findings help illuminate direction for more formal research in the future.

The following findings emerge from survey questions that probed into perceptions of PCC spaces. Much of the findings are inconclusive and point to the difficulty in understanding students' perceptions of space, particularly through a survey. For example, while spaces may come to mind when categories are named, we do not know what factors influence that perception—people? activities? experiences? events? rumors? built environments? Nonetheless, we believe the raw data furthers the discovery phase and draws attention to possibilities for further investigation.

Out of **138** students of color surveyed across the district, the following observations were made:

- 44% of student responses claimed resource centers came to mind as "intersectional-space"
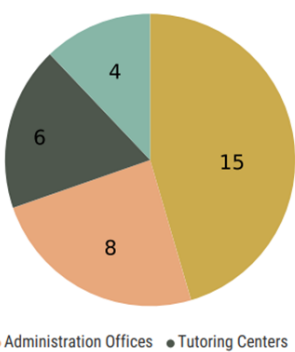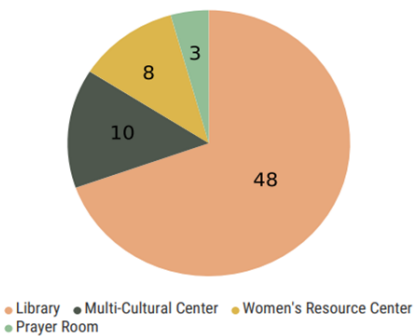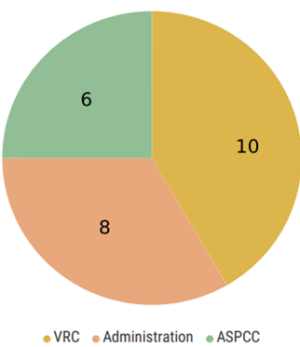- 72% of student responses claimed resource centers came to mind as "under resourced-space"

- 36% said they did not feel that spaces in the PCC environment represented them.
- Student suggestions indicated three potential contributions to spaces that would feel more inclusive: artwork and visual representation, forums that allow students to talk about concerns and issues, and spaces which encourage connection and collaboration.
- Three potentially significant reasons students provided for avoiding spaces include: a lack of representation, crowdedness, and access to/distance from spaces.

"HIDDEN-SPACE"

- 20 — Resource Centers
- 4 — Prayer Rooms

"HETERONORMATIVE-SPACE"

- 9 — All of PCC
- 14 — VRC
- 3 — ASPCC
- 3 — Administration Offices

"INTIMIDATING-SPACE"

- 15 — VRC
- 8 — Administration Offices
- 6 — Tutoring Centers
- 4 — ASPCC

"RELAXING-SPACE"

- 48 — Library
- 10 — Multi-Cultural Center
- 8 — Women's Resource Center
- 3 — Prayer Room

"WHITE-SPACE"

- 10 — VRC
- 8 — Administration
- 6 — ASPCC

About Space Matters

Space Matters was a project of PCC Facilities Planning as a means to align built environments with PCC's strategic vision for equity and inclusion. Through training and practical experience, Space Matters invited students to explore CRT and spatial theories as a means to design campus-based inquiry projects that seek to explore relationships between race and space at PCC. Students participate in 3 daylong workshops, conduct activities in between workshop sessions to further campus-based inquiry projects (ex: taking photos, talking to peers, conducting research), and present project insights and reflections to the PCC community.

Space Matters is also part of a dissertation study. The aim of the study is to increase knowledge that may help educational leaders and campus planners to align facilities planning and design with institutional values for equity and inclusion. The experiences and perceptions of PCC students of color provide valuable insight into ways in which CRT may open possibilities for equity and inclusion in facilities planning and design at a community college. For more information about Space Matters contact Amara H. Pérez, ahperez@uncg.edu.