

Chicano Community: Diversity of Education within Washington State

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Educ 300, Spring

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June 4, 2024

For this project, my topic is MEChA and UW Chicane student organizations. MEChA was the outcome of a major social movement that has been active on some university campuses for more than fifty years and its chapters continue to grow. The UW student organization named UMAS (which then later renamed MEChA) also played a significant role in creating an “umbrella” for all Chicane student groups that connects the population and ensures their well-being.

For the historical context, Mecha was founded at a conference in Santa Barbara, California in 1969. The manifesto called for a unification of all student organizations into one umbrella organization, which was then named Movimiento Estudiantil Chicane/o de Aztlan (MEChA). As it originated in California, from 1969 to 1971, MEChA grew rapidly in the region, while the major centers of activism on campuses were in southern California. However, after the rapid growth of MEChA among the community colleges in California, it experienced a decade of slow growth during the 1990s. Right after that, this organization then experienced an incredible upsurge of new chapters, especially among high school levels. Besides California, other states in the United States of America that have relatively high numbers of MEChA include Washinton

State and some other major cities near the East Coast. In terms of MEChA at UW specifically, as a student organization, it also has a long and rich history. This organization started at UW with some UW Chicano students who were inspired by the social upheaval activities in 1968 that were nationwide. At that time, they already possessed a deep understanding of the struggles of Chicano people because of their own experiences of living in the United States as people of color. The understanding mainly includes the plight of farm workers and the repressive, race-prejudiced system of power in society. Led by thirty-five UW Chicano students, the first chapter of the United Mexican American Students in the Northwest was founded. This student organization was modeled after the group that was founded at the University of Southern California in 1967, which was the earlier form of MEChA. UW UMAS worked to establish a Mexican-American Studies class through the College of Arts & Sciences to ensure that all the Chicano students had an equal opportunity to have access to education at the University of Washington. After that, a transformation process of this student organization happened. In the fall of 1969, UW UMAS officially adopted the name MEChA. This change reflected a shift in consciousness as well as a generational change as members rejected the term “Mexican-American” in favor of the label “Chicano”.

Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to conduct an interview with anyone who was once part of the journey. Therefore, I did study two outstanding figures who were connected to this event. In order to supplement the interview part, I watched the interviewing videos from “Oral Histories”, which is my main source of information. They are Erasmo Gamboa and Sydney Gallegos. Both of them were UW students and the founder members of MEChA. Moreover, they were also both concerned about the growth of Chicano as a group in the communities, which was their main incentive for founding UMAS. Dr. Gallego was part of a battle with the admission

office of the University of Washington because there was a feeling that the Hispanic population on campus was underserved. The aim of the battle was to ensure that all the students, both minorities and people of color, had an equal opportunity to have access to education. They also requested that there should be more Hispanic students entering UW. After getting his PhD Degree at UW, Prof. Erasmo became the Associate Professor of Chicano Studies and Adjunct Associate Professor of History and Latin American Studies. In his part of oral histories, he described how the activities mainly initiated by the United Farm Workers spread across the nation and then on the UW campus as well. Some main buildings on the campus, including HUB and Thomson Hall, were occupied by student activists. When talking about this unforgettable experience of being part of the national Latino Civil rights movement, Prof. Erasmo said “It is amazing to me as a historian a kind of selective memory because we were participatory there were so few of us but um but yes, we were connected.”

My creative expression of this topic is also inspired by the stories behind this history and the hope that people have been fighting for. The background picture of my collage art, which is a mixture of deep red and black that reminds me of blood is from the MEChA de UW website. In my opinion, that background describes the fighting, resistance, and protests that Chicano people had over the years. I also kept the eagle from the official MEChA logo because as it represents the awakened consciousness of Chicano people, I believed it should be at the center of the art.

At the very start of the quarter, it was hard to find connections and resonate with this topic because of my ethnicity being Asian. And my ancestors did not share a similar history. However, as we engaged in more learning and discussion in the classroom, I gained a deeper understanding of this history and these people. As a college student also, I deeply admire the courage and perseverance of those who founded and worked hard to build this organization.

They vividly demonstrate that their efforts are not just for their own benefit, but for the justice of all their peers, families, and ancestors and equality in their communities. Learning about Chicano people in class and doing this project, again reminds me of my responsibility, not only as a college student but also as a global citizen, of respecting and protecting cultures, human rights, diversity, and the neglected minority groups.

My main reason for selecting this topic was initially inspired by the encampments and student protests on university campuses fighting for the rights of Gaza that were nationwide in May. I see many similarities shared between these student protests and the founding of MEChA. This event also reminded me of the incredible strength and resilience of cooperation among college students. After reading the history of MEChA and its founders' interview videos, I see a similar spirit that was empowered by the students.

In summary, my project explores MEChA and UW Chicanx student organizations. MEChA originated in 1969 to unify student organizations nationwide, spreading rapidly in California before experiencing fluctuating growth. At UW, it began as UMAS in response to 1968 social movements, with Chicano students advocating for educational equity and the rights of farm workers. Oral histories from founders Erasmo Gamboa and Sydney Gallegos highlight their fight for Hispanic student representation and involvement in the National Latino Civil Rights Movement. My project's creative element, a collage, reflects MEChA's enduring spirit of resistance and justice.

References

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