Student Services Fee Proposal: Supplemental Information Regarding the Intersection of the Women’s Resource Center with the Unity Center Proposal

As members of the Unity Center Advisory Team and the Unity Center Concept Team respectively, Carly Thomsen and Malia Uhatafe feel connected to the concept that the Unity Center promotes: supporting inter-group dialogue and bringing cultural groups more intimately together with groups working toward LGBTQ and women’s rights.

While the proposal that was put forth to Dr. Melissa Vito from the Unity Center Concept and Advisory Teams provides a well-thought-out example of ways to move forward collaboratively within a challenging economic environment, one small but significant problem with the proposal surrounds the fact that it assumes the WRC and other groups will suffer similarly from budget cuts. Consider the following statement from the first page of the proposal: “If the proposed cuts for 2009 and 2010 come to fruition many Student Affairs programs and services including the Cultural Centers, LGBTQ Affairs, Women’s Resource Center, Pride Alliance, and the Social Justice Programs would be adversely impacted to the extent that there is a strong likelihood that these units would need to significantly curtail their programs and services to the level that they would struggle to cover the most basic of their operations.”

While this statement is certainly true for LGBTQ Affairs, Social Justice Programs and the Cultural Centers, it is not true for the Women’s Resource Center or Pride Alliance. There is one simple reason for this: As student-directed organizations, the Women’s Resource Center and Pride Alliance have almost no institutionalized resources to start with! For example, both groups are granted total operating budgets of approximately $6,500 annually through ASUA. At the same time, the Cultural Centers each necessarily have a full-time paid Director, varying numbers of staff, autonomous spaces, and much larger total budgets. If significant funding is cut to the Cultural Centers, programs and services will undoubtedly be cut, as the proposal argues. But, as a largely student-run organization, the programs and services of the Women’s Resource Center will be cut if we do not receive increased support from the university. In other words, services and programs provided by Cultural Centers will decrease significantly in response to proposed budget cuts; services and programs provided by the Women’s Resource Center will decrease significantly, not in response to the budget crisis, but without a significant increase in University support.

As stated in the initial proposal put forth to the SSF Committee, the Women’s Resource Center currently boasts four strands of continuous programming: Safe Walk, Self-Defense classes, a documentary film series that covers a variety of women’s issues, and our Health and Sexuality committee that provides comprehensive sexual health education workshops, HIV testing and various sexuality and health-related programming. A mere 2.5 years ago, NO programs or services were offered through the Women’s Resource Center. The major reason for this shift in visibility and the levels of programming, services and professional development opportunities provided by the Women’s Resource Center evolved out of the passionate work of individual students: In 2006 two then-graduate students who had previously worked with campus-based Women’s Centers and several non-profit organizations were shocked over the state of the U of A Women’s Center and decided to do something about it. Over the next two years, led by a graduate student with years of organizing experience, UA students built the Women’s Resource Center by developing our highly praised internship program, building many relationships with community and campus groups, bringing in over $70,000 in outside funding, and providing many necessary programs and services to our community.

Without increased support, the Women’s Resource Center will be forced to cut many of these programs and professional development opportunities. Carly Thomsen, who has been largely serving as an unpaid Executive Director/Advisor of the Women’s Resource Center for the past 2.5 years, will be leaving the U of A this summer to begin a doctoral program. Overwhelmed by the amount of unpaid labor we have been consistently providing, Malia Uhatafe, current Co-Director of the
Women’s Resource Center, Carly Thomsen and other leaders in the Center have already started discussing what next year’s WRC will look like without the additional support of a professionalized Director: Our Health and Sexuality committee will be cut, Self-Defense classes will be non-existent and our internship program dramatically reduced. Essentially, the WRC will be forced to cut everything besides our documentary film series and our Safe Walk program, though the latter depends entirely on whether or not our grant is re-funded this year. If the WRC can successfully maintain these two consistent services, this would be a huge feat for a student-run organization. In a matter of months, the Women’s Resource Center will be a shell of what we have fought to develop into.

In short, while the Unity Center reflects a noble desire to maintain the Cultural Centers amidst a massive decrease in their resources, it promises an increase in resources for the Women’s Resource Center. For this reason and many others, it seems senseless to try to keep the WRC distinct from the Unity Center. Yet, we still feel this proposal offered to the SSF Committee to fund the WRC, regardless of our potential inclusion in the Unity Center, is important for a variety of reasons:

- The Unity Center proposal is just that: a proposal. While many members of the campus community hope and believe that this proposal will move forward, there is no guarantee. The WRC needs a guarantee that we will have professional staff and institutionalized support by this summer. Without this professional to work with current WRC Advisors and students, the WRC will lose a great deal of the institutional history, campus and community relationships, and material knowledge on quotidian operations that the WRC has recently developed.
- Each of the Cultural Centers will go into the Unity Center as a developed campus entity. While the WRC provides as much student support and as many professional development opportunities, programs, and services as these Centers, we certainly do not have comparable resources allocated to us. If the Cultural Centers are expected to see the WRC as an equal component, we must have something that we can bring to the table so that others see our inclusion as legitimate, rather than being viewed as one more group responsible for others’ decreased funding.
- Despite having many more resources than the WRC, the budget cuts will likely mean that the resources currently allocated to Cultural Centers will be decreased. If the WRC is included in the Unity Center, but brings in none of its own resources, an unfortunate dichotomy could emerge between the Cultural Centers and the currently student-directed initiatives supported by the WRC.
- Having our own resources and funds actually increases the likelihood that the WRC will move out of ASUA and into the Unity Center! In other words, if the WRC has money allocated specifically to hiring a Director, this person would almost have to be housed in the Unity Center, as an organization that is professionally-directed would need to move out of the student-led ASUA.

At this point, I hope it is obvious that Women’s Resource Center sincerely hopes to be a part of the Unity Center, should it transpire. Eight major campus and community organizations dedicated to women’s rights have written formal letters in support of professionalizing the WRC. Over 4300 members of our University of Arizona community have signed petitions pledging their support. We hope you will listen to these voices, will believe that eradicating sexism is a necessary component of creating a society that truly promotes “justice for all,” and will provide the resources to make the UA Women’s Center reflective of our university’s commitment to excellence.