

Cultural center will not open by end of April

By Tara Flockhart / Daily Staff Writer | Wednesday, April 19, 2006 2:00 AM CDT

Hopes of reopening the Black Cultural Center by the end of April have diminished because of more extensive interior renovations.

Students and Lori Patton, assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies, hope that it will be sooner rather than later.

Patton, who wrote her dissertation on the roles that black cultural centers play in predominately white universities, said the center is important for black students, serving as a "home away from home." Iowa State's center, located at 517 Welch Ave., was closed in the winter of 2003 when pipes in the basement burst.

For more than three years, students and the community worked to raise the necessary \$86,000 in maintenance costs.

Thomas Hill, vice president for student affairs, said it was a little disappointing not reopening the center this week, but he wanted to do it right.

"The most difficult thing right now is to have patience and do it right," he said.

Iowa State's center is unique because students initially raised the money for the project without administrative involvement. Patton said this is above most institutions, but felt that a permanent staff member would help to play a significant role in students' visiting.

"The study is not just about having a cultural center - it's about the presence within," Patton said.

"This is a place where people can go and be themselves."

Alicia McGhee, member of the Black Student Alliance and senior in journalism and mass communication, said she has missed its presence.

"It's been harder for the upperclassmen because we have memories from when it was open," she said.

"The underclassmen can't value or miss something that they haven't yet experienced," she said.

When functioning normally, Patton said centers are especially meaningful for first-year students who are trying to transition because they can turn to older students to help them adjust to the campus environment.

She added that involvement within the cultural center ultimately led to involvement in other campus programs and to the persistence and retention of students.

Other findings from her dissertation indicated that students preferred not to merge different cultural centers because individual identities were lost in the process. Contrary to most cultural center opponents' beliefs, who rationalize that higher education is multiculturally saturated and that these centers create separatism, Patton argued that is not the case at all.

"The centers focus on black experiences, but they are open to everyone," she said.

Her main reason for studying the cultural centers was the lack of research and understanding regarding them.

"There need to be assessments to support these centers' continued existence," she said.

Patton is in the process of writing a book that takes a comprehensive look at all cultural centers on a broad scope. It is set to be released within the next two to three years.