

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Activist Notes The Great Sham of the California State University System

by Liz Sanchez



STUDENT PROTEST OF 40% FEE HIKE, MARCH 1992, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES, OVIATT

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For the past 5 years, I have been actively involved with student politics and activism within the California State University system. From my undergrad to my current status as a grad student, I have collaborated alongside many amazing CSU student activists all over the state in addressing various forms of inequities and injustices we have faced on our CSU campuses and as a statewide system. We organized and participated in numerous on-campus social justice campaigns and direct actions. We have fought against lack of funding, lack of resources, high tuition rates, unfair campus policies, forms of discrimination, and the list goes on and on. The emotional labor invested in our consciousness raising efforts drained us, but we persisted because of our collective identity and the passion we have to fight within student movements. However, what many people do not know or understand is how our experiences often resulted in a fear complex and long-term mental health issues. There were many sleepless nights and weekly anxiety attacks due to our interactions with administrators. For us, administrative corruption went beyond class hierarchy and economic inequities. Many of the administrators we came face to face with threatened, lied, manipulated, and gaslighted us. These experiences inspired my current master's thesis research as I want people to thoroughly understand why student affairs is a sham.

As an organizer and developing researcher, I decided to turn to scholarly activism in order to tell our stories and offer analytical insight. Through qualitative methods, I documented field notes I made through observations of CSU student organizers at all 23 campuses to gain more insight about the collective experience. I then interviewed ten students to obtain in-depth narratives and highlight individual experiences. Five of them were elected student representatives in student government, and the other five were student activists within political grassroots organizations. Additionally, I utilized autoethnographic methods because I was an active participant in the field. Through reflective exercises I provided information on my personal journey and, thus, contributed a narrative to our collective experience. After I collected the data, I scanned the transcriptions and journal entries for patterns, and these patterns developed into 4 overarching themes: *"emotional violence and policing," "attempts at accountability," "recognition of positions of similarity,"* and *"the complications of collective organizing in the CSU."*

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towards consciousness raising efforts, even when they faced burn out and administrative conflict. Yet, the most concerning portion of the findings revealed the significant impact that administrative culture and their authoritative power had over these students and their peers. According to these students, many of them received threats to their academic careers; were threatened with expulsion; were yelled at, bullied and manipulated by admin. Additionally, admin would pit students against each other. Due to their heavy influence in student government and student affairs, administrators were able to normalize a type of civic engagement culture that alienates certain styles of activism. As a result, the student participants and their campaigns were alienated. I, specifically, observed other students' shame and witnessed them disavow the participants of this study because of their forms of activism, and this often created a divide amongst students, which deterred many of their campaign goals. This division often benefitted the admin because it allowed them to dodge accountability efforts and continue on with their own agendas.

CSU student activism and its collision with the administration underlines the varying ways students can be impacted by the corporatization of higher education. As administrators gain more power and partner with privatizers, they maintain colonial fundamentals in higher education. This includes enforcing dominant cultural idealisms, such as structural hierarchies, at the expense of marginalized communities. Today, modern day universities will likely denounce forms of discrimination and offer sympathetic speeches towards student inequity. Yet an institution's unwillingness to shift their foundational values that inflict and perpetuate injustice reveals the true nature of the neoliberal university system. The student organizers I worked with exposed how the CSU commodifies diversity and used our identities as a marketing tool. Instead of addressing student concerns, these admin utilized student codes of conduct and their administrative status to bully these students and deter their activism. They had very little interest in our concerns and the liberation of our communities. Instead, their main interest was to sell our identities and graduation rates so that they can remain competitive in the academic market.

There were moments where I felt defeated, but as I observed and worked alongside these students, I realized how important student activism is and how we must continue our work. A handful of student organizers were often at the core of these campaigns and they sacrificed so much for the benefit of the entire student body. They believe in an education system that is free, accessible, and values community support over profit. These students not only inspired my research, they also inspired me to pay it forward and continue advocating for education reform. We must end administrative corruption and address the managerial model that only works to empower their statuses – not their students. Our truth must be heard, and action must follow. #freethecs



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