

Queers for Educational Justice

<http://queers4publiceducation.wordpress.com/>

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On February 27, 2010, the UC Davis LGBT Resource Center, the single publicly dedicated space for queer and trans people and activism on campus, was spray painted with anti-queer words and phrases. This is one of a series of violent incidents across UC campuses, including the “Compton Cookout” and a noose left in the library at UC San Diego, assaults on gay students at UC Riverside, and the emergence of swastikas in public and private spaces at UC Davis, among others. As we grapple with the overwhelming and traumatic effects of these incidents, it is crucial to attend to their historical and social particularities. At the same time, we ask for a broad view, one that sees these events not just as a series of individual occurrences over the last few weeks, but as symptoms of racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism that justify and inform the very structure of the UC system, especially in the context of a shift toward privatization. In fact, these interlocking systems of oppression persist precisely because their effects seem contained in individual, isolated actions.

We believe it is urgent that we reframe our understanding. Racism and homophobia are not just about a few “hateful” individuals; rather, these systems structure our everyday lives. For example, we must recognize how transphobia, ableism, and racism inform the material structure of our campus, which itself is built on stolen land. Very few buildings at UC Davis have bathrooms that can be safely used by gender non-conforming people and/or people with disabilities. Those same buildings can remind us daily that the university is constructed to make student gatherings and cross-campus collaboration more difficult. On a broader scale, recent proposals to replenish state funding for the UC by accelerating the privatization of prisons and by cutting other public resources (like health and human services) channel resources away from already disadvantaged communities. These many iterations of oppression are not discrete but cumulative injustices and they cannot be dealt with separately.

In public statements, UC administrators have repeatedly expressed their shock and astonishment about recent events. We want to suggest that feelings of surprise are symptomatic of a general lack of awareness of the connection between these events and systemic violence. They also indicate an ignorance of the everyday violence that is pervasive in and perpetuated by the UC system as it currently exists and the failure of institutional systems of reporting to meet the needs of students. In fact, astonished reactions suggest not that this violence is otherwise absent from our lives and campuses, but rather that those who are taken aback by such violence do so from positions of privilege that enable them to ignore violence that is not brought to their attention. Framing these events as singular and isolated enables surprised reactions and disconnects these events from a broader context of structural oppression.

We are not surprised that these actions have erupted in the midst of a financial crisis for the UC system, and for its students, faculty, and workers. We note that most of the students organizing against budget cuts and fee increases do so from marginalized positions, foregrounding broader questions of social justice and calling for the downward distribution of resources. In this context, recent violent acts are best understood as part of a larger backlash against modes of student organizing that threaten the privileges linked to whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality, and citizenship. Such events do not emerge suddenly or unexpectedly, but are intimately linked to more pervasive and naturalized systems of oppression. Focusing responses only on the punishment of individual perpetrators effaces the larger context out of which such actions emerge. Students who are already wary of the presence of armed security forces that have historically targeted people who are queer and/or of color, take the proposed

presence of the FBI and increased surveillance of campus as a threat and fundamental misunderstanding of our experiences rather than a solution or a sign of support.

We also argue that the recent vandalism of the LGBTRC is not the only example of violence enacted against queer and trans people at UC Davis. Violence must be not be understood as only physical or verbal attacks on individuals; rather, we understand any practice that perpetuates or exacerbates marginalization as an act of violence. The university has systematically de-funded the LGBTRC, other queer and trans resources, and social justice oriented departments. This lack of financial and academic support indicates a disregard for the needs of queer and gender non-conforming students. One might even argue that the university's negligence creates an environment that condones overt displays of anti-queer sentiment by communicating that queer and trans activism and scholarship are at best an extraneous indulgence and ultimately disposable in times of financial crisis. By putting students in this situation, the university is complicit in the violence and threats of violence that these students experience.

This broader violence is obviated through the drastic increase in fees, which disproportionately affects people from historically marginalized communities. The decision to transfer the cost of education from the state to the students contributes to the privatization of public higher education, ensures a rapid increase in student debt, and threatens more Californians with increasing poverty. It is also premised upon the false assumption that all students can and do rely on family support. Queer and trans students, for instance, might not have that financial backing, either because their family does not have the money or because their family has removed support after learning of their gender and/or sexual identity. Other students may make the potentially painful or stressful decision to hide those identities from their families or delay gender transition in order to secure the support they need to complete their education. These possibilities are further exacerbated for AB540 and other students without access to financial aid and thus expose students to further physical and emotional violence. In a culture pervaded by racism, homophobia, classism, and other oppressive systems, acts that do not work against marginalization must be understood as tacitly and violently sustaining the status quo.

We acknowledge, appreciate, and respect the ongoing and longstanding anti-oppression work emerging in the student resource centers and in many classroom spaces, and understand the current student and worker movements not as new starts, but as growing with and from existing struggles. Student critiques are informed by long histories of activism and scholarship, and the university as a whole must take these critiques seriously. But the work of educating the campus community must not fall on marginalized students and under-resourced organizations. For example, several students at the March 1st town hall in response to the vandalism at the LGBTRC called for more education about homophobia, transphobia, and racism on campus, and suggested mandatory anti-oppression training for all incoming students at UC Davis. We question the efficacy of pro forma required two-hour trainings and the strain this proposal would put on already underfunded resources like the LGBTRC and Cross Cultural Center, including underpaid and overburdened staff and student interns. We propose instead a list of actions that can and should be taken by UC Davis administration and the UC Office of the President immediately. We offer these recommendations not in competition with other contributions but as continuous with other queer imaginings of the future of the university and in solidarity with anti-racist and anti-privatization student movements more broadly.

Recommended Actions: How to Make UC Davis a Less Racist & Less Homo/Transphobic Place

In order to make UC Davis a less racist and homo/transphobic space, the university must commit itself to a series of large-scale structural, system-wide transformations. Such changes might include (but are

certainly not limited to) a re-commitment to the master plan, a return to genuinely affordable fee levels, comprehensive financial aid (excluding loans), fair pay for all campus workers, becoming a sanctuary space for all undocumented persons, disarming campus police officers, disinvestment from military research, and the provision of a tuition-free education for indigenous peoples.

We recognize that these changes will take a significant amount of time and will require a radical rethinking of the purpose and structure of public education. If, however, the university would like to demonstrate its commitment to dismantling some of the racism and homophobia on campus, then we'd like to recommend a few steps that can be taken immediately. We look forward to engaging in future conversations with other individuals and groups invested in imagining a new version of the university that actualizes social justice.

Although our suggestions focus on changes that can be made at UC Davis, we believe important connections must be drawn between events across campuses and communities and between the efforts to respond to these events. We resist, however, recent attempts to fold the UC Irvine protests into other actions of "intolerance" from recent weeks. The 11 students who briefly stood to verbally disrupt the Israeli Ambassador's speech challenged existing structures of power, and did so from positions of relative marginalization in the face of a powerful state actor. Given these unequal power dynamics, the students' actions are not commensurate with other recent incidents, and we suggest that "intolerance" operates in proposals to expel these students, rather than in their dissenting speech acts.

Campus Space

The university must ensure that every building on the UC Davis campus has safe and accessible bathrooms for gender non-conforming people, people with disabilities, and people with children, among others. Students will not be able to focus on their education if they have to decide whether to be late for class while looking for a bathroom or be on time while risking discomfort, safety, and health complications. Similarly, staff and faculty must have access to safe and dignified restroom facilities without fear of harassment, judgment or violence.

Centers

The university must recognize the LGBT Resource Center, the Cross Cultural Center, the Student Recruitment and Retention Center, the Student Disability Center, and the Women's Resources and Research Center as core components of the university's mission. These centers make the campus a liveable space for many students and have a positive impact on the campus climate more broadly. Though all units on campus have had their funding cut, the centers function as a crucial, bottom-line safety net for the students most directly affected by the broader cuts, and their labor increases exponentially as students are less able to access resources elsewhere in the university. In order for these centers to continue and expand upon the vital role they play in the campus community, the university must provide each center with the funding and space necessary to support center directors, assistant directors, graduate student assistants, and undergraduate interns.

Academics and Curriculum

The university must re-commit itself to the robust funding of programs, departments, and graduate groups that directly and critically engage cultural and economic politics and the intersecting structures of race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and class. Rather than relying on the labor of marginalized students to conduct various kinds of anti-oppression workshops or to teach courses in the absence of tenure-track faculty hires, the university must provide full funding for the programs that place these lessons at the center of their curriculum, must require students in all fields of study to complete "diversity" requirements, must ensure that faculty are not reproducing oppressive structures in their

classes, and must demand that all programs and departments instruct at least one required course that connects their field to its real life impacts on historically marginalized communities.

The university must strenuously reject any proposals involving differential fees for different UC campuses or programs of study. Especially worrisome is the current proposal for the March 23-25 Regents' meeting to remove the word "public" from policy for setting fees for professional schools. Such plans perpetuate the racial and economic segregation of our university system, indicate that UC administration views education merely in terms of direct monetary value, and designate some knowledges as more valuable than others. Maintaining the public core of the UC is all-important.

Administration

The university must revise the format of all demographic surveys that are distributed with the purpose of assessing the needs of students, faculty, and staff. Specifically, the university must stop requiring people to identify their gender and race according to designated categories; instead, the university must provide a space for self-identification on all forms that ask a person's gender and/or race as well as a place where a person can elect to indicate their sexual identity. If university decisions regarding recruitment, retention, and funding will be based on the data collected from these surveys, then the university must make an effort to ensure that their data more accurately reflects the campus community.

Frequently, due to a lack of direct knowledge of student experiences, administration relies on statistics that translate the student resource centers' work into the number of students served to quantify its impact. The university must reject a tendency to reduce student experiences and concerns to statistics. We are too often confronted with a demand to produce a significant number of students to justify the time, expense, and labor of organizing in the service of marginalized groups which, by definition, may not show up in statistical analyses. The university must prioritize availability of resources and structural support as determining factors in the recruitment and retention of marginalized students. Moreover, because racism, homophobia, and other oppressive systems harm everyone, not just those belonging to targeted groups, material support for dismantling these systems benefits the campus as a whole.

Recourse / Accountability

The administration must determine a system for hearing and recording student concerns with racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. Students who confront their professors' homophobia or racism in the classroom, for example, risk serious repercussions involving grades or classroom dynamics. Students should be able to access an advocate who can both work with students in these situations and record these events to establish patterns. The administration should put this in place only under the guidance of the student resource centers and should release a statement explaining the system chosen and the rationale behind it.

Public education is an important part of dismantling systemic oppression but is not the only part. Public education must be valued alongside other public services, not funded at their expense. This funding crisis is an opportunity to rethink what we expect from the state, not to choose some services over others.

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