

College of Ethnic Studies

Dean's Call to Action

The College, University, and Relevant Public Higher Education: A Way Forward

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress" Frederick Douglas

It is time to move our valuable critical discourse to collective action and achieve great things.

A dispute between the College of Ethnic Studies (the College) and San Francisco State University (the University) instantaneously grew to university-wide, system-wide, statewide, and national proportions. As important as we believe the College to be, it was clear that our questions had sounded a chord much greater than our single note. The national support and solidarity have equally demonstrated that the struggle born from our questions is well worth the potential value for our communities.

Clearly the core factors in the dispute between the College and the University over hundreds of thousands of dollars inside of a budget made of hundreds of millions of dollars could not account for why addressing the College's budgetary need appeared intractable to the University. Yet, this dispute between the University and one of its constituent parts did garner national attention. As uncomfortable as it has become for all, interrogating our case has uncovered deep-seated questions of importance not only to the College but also to the national community struggling for fully accessible, fully funded, high-quality, relevant public higher education. These questions are timely given that success in the 21st century demands an understanding of the intellectual traditions, struggles, achievements and aspirations of all communities equitably.

We live in an historical moment when the state of California and the United States are experiencing unprecedented personal wealth, albeit held in the smallest percent of the population ever. At the same time, political leaders have chosen to provide the smallest share of that wealth for the public good, particularly public higher education. Public higher education is a proven pipeline to success for the poor and working classes and the backbone of the nation's real economic strength. Moreover, we are experiencing one of the most vitriolic backlashes against people of color, the poor, gender or sexually non-conforming communities and others in recent history. Our local challenge is apparently a flashpoint for systemic state and national challenges.

If true, then this has become bigger than all of us, but equally relevant for any one of us, or even many of us, to call for collective action. Where does one start when one identifies that the challenge may be of almost epic proportions? Start simply and locally, and then build to larger and national issues. First, agree to begin searching out agreement or common ground. Second, agree on a mutually acceptable convener, facilitator or facilitating body. Third, resist the desire to avoid the greater challenge or provide quick and insufficient fixes that simply numb the immediate pain enough to discourage the urgency for real engagement. Fourth, be persistent and commit long-term to social justice through public higher education.

Collectively, we are up to this major challenge. With impressive student led organization, and the numerous communications of support for the College, the University and for a just solution, we clearly have awakened a conscious public willing to assist us in this task. We have received supportive correspondence from national organizations¹ and universities, a sufficient number of SF State department chairs representing at least half of the faculty, and all of the other college deans¹, everyone committing their leadership and energies to the task. Then, of course, the student leadership has already demonstrated its critical analyses, dynamic energy and powerful organizing skills. Disputes have a rhythm. I believe this degree of shared rhythm signals that we have reached a tipping point when a critical mass is willing and able to achieve a paradigm shift, locally and nationally.

Thus, I propose we take our excellent statements analyzing the problem and meet as a community to take action on those analyses. The student-led collective of students, faculty and community members with the College of Ethnic Studies, and the full body of shared governance--the President's Cabinet, the Academic Senate, and the Associated Students--should convene the campus in equal partnership.

This gathering should be a strategic working meeting, which addresses both short-term solutions to address immediate need, and a long-term vision implemented through institutionalized bodies and initiatives to ensure our ongoing responsiveness to the needs of students and faculty. Taking the student demands and the president's stated first steps as starting points, all parties should commit to addressing the identified issues through a restorative and just framework. The parties should be prepared to gather additional concerns that arise from the discussions to be placed on the agenda of the structures and process that would be charged to carry the long-term strategies forward. Finally, these meetings must also ignite the birth of an educational movement, one that will partner with colleagues and institutions nationally, to restore fully funded excellent relevant education to California and provide a model for the nation.

Building on Dr. Martin Luther King's remarks, President Barack Obama encouraged that "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.*" The arc bends by the power of the collective will of the people, and I earnestly believe that we are the right people to take our turn at bending the arc in the direction of greater justice through more accessible and relevant education.

Respectfully and in service,

Kenneth P. Monteiro, Dean

1. Note: Though I am supportive of these documents, because of my role as Dean of the College of Ethnic Studies and therefore central to the question at hand, and as a member of both bodies, I respectfully abstained from signing the documents from the National Association of Ethnic Studies and the SFSU College deans to indicate clearly that these statements reflect no self-interest on my part.