

Community Studies, UC & Us

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UCSC's Dean of Social Sciences has announced his intention to dismantle the essential field study component of the popular, widely influential Community Studies Program. This budget-cutting measure may be easier than sharing pain across the board; it's certainly consistent with the long-term effort to de-emphasize "experiential learning" programs campuswide. But it will be an unbelievably bad move for the University's relationship to Santa Cruz County.

Over 30 years at UCSC I taught many students from that program; as citizen activist I've worked alongside a good many more. These people, by and large, are better acquainted with the workings of our society, and more experienced at working and communicating with people whose views differ from their own than most students today – in short, they are well-trained exemplary citizens for participation in a democratic society.

Hundreds of teachers, social workers, service agency staffers, community organizers and other civic-minded people in the Monterey Bay region are Community Studies graduates – among them former Santa Cruz mayor Jane Weed-Pomerantz, Barrios Unidos Director Nane Alejándrez, Community Action Board Director Christine Johnson-Lyons, local historian Carolyn Swift, anti-tax crusader Harold Griffith and former Chamber of Commerce Director Greg Carter.

Organizations such as Walnut Avenue Women's Center, Santa Cruz Aids Project, Boys and Girls' Club, Homeless Garden Project, Davenport Resource Center, and Santa Cruz County Immigration Project rely heavily on services provided by students from this program, while contributing substantially to their training. Community Studies has provided, since 1969, over 1.7 million hours of community service to Santa Cruz County agencies. But this, sad to say, is an anomaly in today's University of California.

The University, founded in 1868 as a "land grant college", was supported by the state and federal governments to teach agriculture, engineering, medicine, law and "other scientific and classical studies... to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes..." During most of its history it was a public institution funded by the taxpayers to provide higher education at low cost to all who qualified for admission, as an investment in California's future. The taxpayers also sponsored vital faculty research in many fields. But that public university is no more.

During World War II the federal government made vast sums available to the University for military and other scientific research, especially the development of nuclear weapons. Later big corporations got into the game. The University followed the money. By the 1960s the Master Plan relegated most teaching to

the state universities and community colleges; and President Clark Kerr could both describe and preside over a research “multiversity” beholden primarily to the government and corporations, a “knowledge factory” ruled on corporate principles by efficient managers, receiving less than a quarter of its revenue from public coffers. UCSC was an experimental exception for some time; but it has tended to revert to form.

Since 1990, further drastic cuts in taxpayer contributions have accelerated the flat-out privatization. Students and their families now pay, through increasing fees and interest-bearing loans, the entire real cost of an undergraduate education -- a backbreaking burden for future teachers and social workers. Financial aid is scarce. The grandchildren of Californians educated for free when the University was seen as a basic good comparable to roads, parks and libraries, now graduate with tens of thousands of dollars in debt.

This sorry situation results from decades of Californian “tax resistance.” The University we need, to educate our children and carry out researches of benefit to society, is one in which Community Studies would flourish. In the University we have, a program that doesn’t generate big grants and merely trains personnel for agencies that serve the poor, is hard to justify.

Until we renew the historic contract with our grandchildren, and pay the taxes required to maintain a great public university, UC will continue to lay off lecturers, cut teaching assistantships, raise tuition and fees, underpay clerical and maintenance workers, turn students away from understaffed classes, and eliminate valuable programs.

Strange indeed that with signs of social and economic implosion all around, with a community organizer as President of the United States, the University of California at Santa Cruz in its wisdom decides it can do without the nation’s premier academic program in Community Studies. “Fiat lux”, the University’s slogan proclaims. “Let there be light.”