Students for Quality Education
Decolonize the University

By Nicholas L. Baham III, Ph.D.

More than 40 years after the struggles for free speech and ethnic studies at the University of California Berkeley and San Francisco State, students on the 23 campuses of the California State University (CSU) system are forging a new form for this generation’s protest movement.

Students for Quality Education (SQE) belongs to this new wave of organizations rising to protest cuts in the budget for higher education, increases in tuition, fees, and class sizes, reductions in available courses, and irresponsible salary increases for top administrators.

These new groups differ from previous student organizing in their commitment to creating alliances with the community, eschewing the traditional privilege and presumed vanguard status of the educated class, and redefining university students as workers subject to the dictates of contemporary neoliberalism.

SQE’s specific demands grow out of this reframing. The group focuses on the growing debt burden that working class students are shouldering as public education is privatized. Its members actively engage other workers and activists in dialogue to build community.

But even more important than SQE’s connection to the wider community is its inclusionary practice, rooted in its conscious understanding of racial, gender and sexual identity differences. In this it surpasses its predecessors (such as the Free Speech Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, SNCC, and the Third World Liberation Front) as well as its contemporary allies in Occupy, who remain at a stage of debating and theorizing the deconstruction of white male privilege.

In my view, students are a definite part of the broader struggles of the 99% because we face the possibility of not being able to survive in an ever-growing economic downturn, despite getting an education. We carry some of the biggest debt in the country. This debt and its increase over time due to loans are directly related to increased tuition and fees. Both will squeeze out people of lower-income backgrounds and thereby prevent any real success.

The driving force behind the efforts to privatize public higher education is the rich few who want to marginalize and push out lower income people, who are predominantly people of color. Behind privatization is a system that puts money towards prisons that are filled up with a majority of African Americans and Latinos. Our country spends billions of dollars on Afghanistan, yet there is no similar amount of money put towards the education system. This continuing misallocation of funds to wars, prisons and other areas will lend itself to the collapse of our society and the people within it.

As far as Occupy is concerned, I would say that a more inclusive attitude is necessary in order to build community and actually have a more valuable effect on particular issues. I definitely feel that the Occupy movement needs to be more inclusive so others feel comfortable in taking part in making decisions and taking any actions thereafter. —

“Students face the possibility of not being able to survive, despite getting an education.”
Given the CSU system's long history of embracing diverse communities of working class students, it provides an ideal base for SQE, even as its commitment to its traditional population is in jeopardy.

SQE may reasonably claim varying degrees of credit for the California State Senate’s denial of reappointment to former CSU Trustee Herb Carter, limitations on executive salary increases, and State Assembly Speaker John Perez’ Middle Class Scholarship bill, which aims to substantially lower CSU and UC tuition and fees for students from families earning less than $150,000 per year.

Several state tax measures supported by SQE that will appear on the November 2012 ballot may also help to stem the tide of rising fees and shrinking services: the Molly Munger initiative, the Millionaires Tax, the Tax on Oil to Fund Education Initiative, and the California Income Tax for Multistate Businesses.

In the end, SQE may be judged by its effectiveness at limiting the ravages of privatization in state education—but its ideology and practice of radical inclusivity and 99% discourse will forever alter the future of university protest.

Abigail Andrade, SQE, California State University East Bay

As a first-time college student and Chicana single mother, I come from a low-income household and had always been told that college would be my ‘ticket’ to success. However, student debt and the current job market make me feel I'll continue to be ‘stuck’ in an economic struggle for some time.

Although we are ‘student-activists’ and many of our actions involve issues in higher education, we're constantly trying to connect with other social movements. We've held several SQE meetings at Occupy Oakland, we’ve gone as a group to the general strikes and port shut-downs, and some members have been arrested at some of the actions.

Our actions have specific demands: Roll back student fees; fund higher education by taxing corporations; put decision-making power in the hands of students, faculty and staff; and democratize the Board of Trustees. Our demands are linked with Occupy Education, where we demand that California make education at all levels a priority and provide quality education in grades K-12, as well as in higher education.

On March 1, SQE organized “People’s University: Liberate Education.” Students conducted teach-ins on topics, such as radical theory, democratizing the Board of Trustees, fee hikes, access to higher education, free speech, and faculty solidarity. This was all in an effort to educate our student body on issues that affect all of us within CSU, and on ways we can organize to reclaim our universities.

In SQE we have women of color, transgender, undocumented, radical, and not-so-radical folks. Yet, we all vibe together in a way that is extremely hard to describe. We always seem to point out who seems to hold leadership positions. The majority of folks at Occupy Oakland are white males or white women, and after making a lot of connections with them, most seem to be college-educated. People of color have been disproportionately affected by the issues that the Occupy Movement has called attention to, yet the organizers and ‘decision makers’ have been primarily white. In a discussion with Dr. [Luz] Calvo [in Ethnic Studies, CSU East Bay], we talked about how some occupiers are ready for a confrontational action on May Day. However, undocumented Americans also want to participate in the May Day actions, and it’s unfair to put people who have more to lose at such a risk. Once again, I think it all comes back to checking our privilege.

Nicholas L. Baham III is an associate professor of Ethnic Studies at California State University East Bay.
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Race, Poverty & the Environment
Urban Habitat
1212 Broadway, Suite 500
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 839-9609
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ISSN# 1532-2874

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