

March 5, 2010



In Their Own Voices

March 4, 2010 – Mesa students gathered in the “grassy area” in front of the cafeteria to protest budget cuts impacting education. But, unlike many other forums where this issue is discussed, the state legislature, budget committees, city council chambers, the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO,) the California Department of Finance, and the governor’s office, nowhere were the statements more compelling, more relevant to the future of this state, and more gripping in the depiction of the scope of the damage to the lives of individuals and their families, than the statements made by student after student as they each found their voice and raised it to speak.

At the invitation of Professor Jennifer Cost, I had the privilege of opening the rally with my own statements. Soon thereafter, my quotes and figures paled in comparison to the compelling testimony of students who were literally fighting for their lives and their future – or, should I say for those that don’t yet get it, California’s future.

Students became the teachers yesterday. Professor Cost urged all students to write down their stories and to submit them directly to her. She plans to provide these stories to those participating in the March on March from Bakersfield to Sacramento. The marchers want to respond, using the voice of students, to anyone who asks why the march is necessary. In response to Professor Cost, I have written down what I heard yesterday, as they say, “for the record:”

- A 28-year-old psychology major – who turned his life around, returned to school and worked diligently to transform a 1.5 into a 3.7. GPA. He is a member of the Psi Beta National Honor Society who finds himself unable to graduate this year because the course he needed to complete the requirements in his major was not available. He worries about his future and fears falling back into the cycle of hopelessness that assailed him before he found Mesa College.
- A reentry parent – who became pregnant at 17 and postponed her education. She is now the parent of a 17-year-old and relayed to us a conversation with her children about the rising cost of education; worrying about whether or not her GI Bill would be sufficient to meet the needs of the family. In response, her nine- year-old said, “Don’t worry mommy, I don’t have to go to college so you don’t have to worry about money.” She cried, by the way, as she told us that story as only mothers can cry when they feel pain for their children.
- An Asian student – whose parents each work two jobs, immigrants whose only hope for the future is education. It was evident from this student that he feared, most of all, having to remain

in college longer than necessary. He worried about how long he would be responsible for prolonging the sacrifice of his parents to ensure that he could stay in school as a full-time student.

- The transfer student – who felt betrayed by having done all we asked her to do to fulfill transfer requirements, only to find that she had no place to go. There was no room at San Diego State University for her in the fall. She asked, as only one who deeply feels righteous indignation can ask, “Tell me, what do I do in the fall? Where do I go to school? Will I ever be able to transfer? Do I step out for a year, and then what?”

- A disabled student – speaking through an interpreter, ready to transfer to San Francisco State University but is struggling without an interpreter to help tutor her in a statistics course.

- Numerous other students spoke without a script or a shred of paper to guide their presentations. Many of them said they had never attended a rally or addressed a large group of people. Many were shaking, many crying, some outright indignant. Yet, they found the courage to lend energy and passion to preserve educational opportunity not just for themselves, but for the entire group at Mesa College and beyond. One student announced he was 17-years-old and was part of our FastTrack program with Kearny Mesa High School. He despaired at not being old enough to vote to help shape the future, and he pleaded with those in the audience who could vote to do so on the behalf of those whose future was being bartered away through misdirected policies and priorities.

- One student, who had not planned to speak because he came from a family where both parents had flourishing careers and were not financially constrained, nevertheless felt compelled to speak. His dream is to become a teacher and he now seriously doubted whether or not there would be a school that would hire him once he completed his education. He pleaded for the future and for the children in K-12 that he was committed to serve.

- Diversity, and diverse voices, was front and center at this protest. Students from East Africa, the Middle East, Japan, Mexico, and the Pacific Islands all lent their voices which started in different places around the globe but now converged in California – eager to be educated so they could contribute to this state. These were strong believers that people could make a difference in their government. Immigrants leave their homeland with deep belief in the democratic process to be found in their new country; a belief so ingrained that nothing can possibly shake it.

- And then, there was the student rapper – who stunned the group with a soulful delivery about the right to education. One line struck me most directly, “Don’t they get it, the best anti-crime legislation is education, the best anti-poverty legislation is education.” He is so right! By the way, his rap was both in English and Spanish, and at the end, he mixed both languages adeptly, expertly, and convincingly.

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These are the voices of Mesa students, the voices of California's future. We are all clear about the goals for the March in March from Bakersfield to Sacramento:

- 1) Restoration of the promise of public education,
- 2) A government and economy that works for all Californians, and
- 3) Fair taxes to fund California's future.

Ultimately, the students understand that the 2/3 supermajority needed to pass a state budget each year thwarts the democratic process, enabling a minority of the legislature to hold the will of the majority at bay. Ultimately, students also understand that the Master Plan for Higher Education that promised access to education to all, which would benefit the State of California, has simply reneged on that promise fifty years after it was made. Yes, the Master Plan turns fifty in 2010, and it also appears that the Master Plan has turned its back on the promises that made California great. At Mesa College, there are future teachers, artists, engineers, psychologists, biochemists, writers, graphic designers, software designers, physical therapists, and radiologic technologists, all on hold – waiting and wondering why. One thing is clear: They will not wonder long because they now realize action and personal advocacy are the keys.

I had not heard the term “teach-in” for nearly 45 years. Yesterday, I not only heard it, I witnessed it once again at Mesa College. The faculty were there in force, and the students recognized them as their mentors and thanked them for their support. It was truly a day of teaching and learning, and tomorrow is a day for acting directly on behalf of California's future.