

It is time to make the CSU a *truly public* system of higher education again!



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During our historic #FightforFive campaign, faculty activists experienced the pleasure of working with student activists, especially those who organize within Students for Quality Education (SQE). We spent many days together at the Chancellor’s Office, speaking at Trustees meetings about our concerns during “public comment” sessions.

As CFA activists spoke routinely to the Trustees about our campaign to win fair salaries after a decade of stagnation, students communicated their dire struggles to afford an education in the CSU—and sometimes to afford food and shelter, too.

As the weeks wore on, it became clear that thousands of students were taking our stories to heart. They came to understand that paying faculty fairly generates better conditions and results for everyone—students, faculty, and our communities across California as a whole.

Thousands of students came to comprehend what we mean when we say that education is, or *should be*, a public good. We all benefit, as a society, when we invest in the creative labor that happens in university classrooms.

Because students understood this, they stood with us, insisting that the CSU’s administration do the right thing.

We, the faculty, also listened to students’ concerns as we inched toward the strike. And we must continue to listen openly and carefully to them.

They experience intimately what sociolo-

gists and economists know to be true: the USA has once again become an extraordinarily unequal society, to such a degree that public higher education (PHE) is unable to significantly remedy through mobility, especially as the “public” in public higher education has been eroded over the last several decades.

What makes the CSU a system of *public* higher education?

The very existence of “public education” is rooted in a political and moral idea of education as a public good, as a commons to which everyone is entitled, and as a human right people inherit by virtue of their birth—and without regard to ability to pay.

Students know that we need to put the P back in PHE in California. Nationally, they have pushed political candidates to acknowledge the merits of free, universal public higher education. It’s our turn, as faculty leaders, to join their efforts to win free, universal public higher education in California.

California is the wealthiest state in the nation and sixth largest economy in the entire world. With the moral imagination and political will, we can make the CSU a truly

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public system of higher education. It takes listening to our students, learning about their lives and concerns, and taking the risk to stand with them in a bold—but entirely achievable—vision.

So the next time you hear a campus “leader” remark that the 40/40/20 formula (40% state funding, 40% funding through tuition, 20% funding through private donations) is the “new normal” in the CSU, remember the wisdom and vision of CSU students.

We are the ones who collectively create our reality in the CSU. Yes, we can—through collective moral imagination and political action—stand together to demand a new normal on our campuses and in Sacramento. We can challenge the cynics who cannot imagine the revival of the Master Plan. Students are depending upon us to summon our energy, courage, and voices as faculty in defense of the public good.

Given the historic and odious levels of student debt, social inequality, and continuing trends of unequal pay by race and gender, what other position could we—faculty of conscience at the People’s University—possibly take? ■