

Statement from the Nielson 5 Students do non-violent study in for higher education access and diversity

To the State of California,

On Monday March 1st at 3:00 PM, 11 UC students and allies, including an Alum accompanied by legendary labor activist and co-founder of the UFW Dolores Huerta, walked into Budget Vice Chair California Assemblyman Nielsen's (R-Yuba City) office asking that he sign a letter with the following demands:

"I commit to prioritizing higher education in the budget and budget negotiations. I will not vote for a budget that does not increase funding to our state's public higher education systems.

Furthermore, the recent events at the University of California, San Diego, such as the "Compton Cookout" and the noose hung in the Geisel library, highlight the deeply seeded intolerance within the UC. Thus, I commit to institutionalizing and strongly advocating for funding of student-initiated outreach and academic preparation, yield, and multicultural student development programs. Such programs recruit and retain low-income, first-generation UC and CSU students. I will not approve a budget that does not include these funds."

As we walked into Assembly Member Nielsen's office, Legislative Director Dave Weiher approached us. We politely asked if the Assembly Member could meet with us to look over our letter. He assured us that it would not be possible and furthermore noted that Nielsen has already spent 45 minutes with University of California (UC) administrators and student representatives. As we made our request, students sat down around the office and began to study, reading from books ranging from *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* to *Fundamentals of Physics*. Wieher quickly asked if this would be a "sit in". We confirmed his observation, after which he directed the women at the reception desk to, "call the sergeant at arms". We henceforth engaged in a civil debate over the contents of the letter. For the most part Weiher deflected the specific points of the letter, instead asking us whether we knew "how much a school teacher makes?". The staffer also attempted to pit other issues against Higher Education funding, repeatedly referring to quadriplegics.

At some point the letter was allegedly presented to Nielsen. We were informed that Nielsen would neither sign the letter nor meet with us, repeatedly referring to the 45-minute session with student representatives from University of California Student Association (UCSA) and administrators, that he participated in earlier that day. We told

him that we were not associated with the UCSA nor necessarily agreed with and in fact were in conflict with decisions by the UC administration. We furthermore affirmed that we were acting as individuals who had become frustrated with the lack of action from our state representatives. Specifically, we had become disillusioned and frustrated with repeated promises that have not been kept, to preserve the integrity and world class character of the UC. We want firm commitments.

After more discussion, Weiher reiterated that Nielsen would not sign the letter and asked us to leave. We refused. The sergeant at arms returned to explain what would happen in response to our refusal to leave. He declared that if we continued, we would be arrested for demonstrating without a permit as well as disrupting business in the capitol. We reiterated that we came in peacefully and meant to discuss our concern without hostility or malice. When it was clear that police arrest was an impending threat, some students decided it was not a risk they could take and walked out into the hallway and stayed in solidarity, assembling with over one hundred UC students who upon hearing the news of the "study in" congregated outside.

As things wore on, State Senator Leland Yee (D-District 8) came to our aide. Senator Yee played a critical role in mediating. At his request we avoided a stay in county jail and instead were "cited and released" by the California Highway Patrol, who were civil and reasonable. Senator Yee's participation showed how strong of a supporter he is for the student movement and public education. Furthermore, Dolores Huerta proved to be an unexpected vocal and thoughtful ally throughout. Her words were grounded in concerns for working people, which Nielsen's staff pretended to have sensitivity towards.

Concurrently, a separate group of students entered the office of Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) with the same letter and demand. In contrast to Nielsen, Senator Steinberg met with the concerned students and scheduled a follow up meeting, going so far as to commend the students for their political engagement.

Throughout our study in, Nielsen's staffer - along with the intermittent participation of the chief of staff - was extremely adamant that funding for higher education could not be increased due to other priorities in the state budget. Furthermore, Nielsen's staff constantly informed us that we had a choice, that a better choice would be to leave and not get a misdemeanor. A misdemeanor could potentially affect our future employment. We responded that Assemblymen Nielsen had a choice as well, a choice to not condone the arrests of students. At that point, we had made it clear, that we were willing to leave the office if he would only briefly see us and personally tell us why he would not sign the letter. We feel that Legislators, such as Nielsen, must stop treating higher education as just another "line item" to deal with. He is not simply dealing with higher education. The state legislature is holding the future of California's families and children in their hands. Whatever inventions are necessary to provide for improved quality of life have and will come from the UC. Whatever future revenue and innovations that will propel the state forward has and will come from the UC. We believe that fundamental change needs to be enacted by leaders, such as Nielsen, to restore what was once an affordable and

accessible higher education system. We stand in solidarity not only with other University of California students but also California State University and California Community College students.

Lastly, we would like to thank those who came to our aid and gave us strength. Thank you to State Senator Leland Yee for negotiating on our behalf and not only fully supporting us, but also for helping to garner more support within the Senate and Assembly. Thank you to AFSCME for serving as our liaisons to the arresting authorities and continued legal assistance. Thank you to Dolores Huerta for your transcendent presence and commitment to improving the lives of students and workers. And most of all, thank you to the hundreds of students who stood in solidarity and maintained our ethic of non violent direct action. We look forward to and will continue working in concert with any and all allies in the fight for an affordable, accessible, and diverse Higher Education.

In Solidarity,

The Nielsen Five