

CONFERENCE DEFENDS PUBLIC HIGHER ED

By Linda Sneed

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Throughout the US, students face fewer sections of needed courses and higher tuition and fees; faculty and staff see less job security, fewer benefits, little to no salary increases (if not salary reductions), and workload creep. What to do?

In early January, defenders of public higher education met in Los Angeles during the Modern Language Association's annual convention to craft and share strategies to keep the doors open to a robust and just public higher education system. In a series of panel presentations and audience discussions organized by Bob Samuels of UC-AFT, conversations consistently returned to the importance of advocacy, organizing, and solidarity within and outside of higher education.

Placing the recent protests against dramatic tuition increases for UC students in a national context, Joshua Clover showed documentation of ways in which "higher education solidarity proceeds in solidarity with house foreclosures, whether it knows it or not." He used this data to suggest that we seize opportunities to find common ground with others facing economic hardship and create a stronger movement for public services and the rights of working people.

In answer to the title of his panel, "Organizing Labor and the Academic Class War," Joe Berry quipped, "We can, and there is" and emphasized contingent faculty (part-time faculty in the community colleges, part-time and full-time non-tenure-track in the CSU and UC systems) as ripe for organizing as workers and "helping rebuild the labor movement." Co-panelist Maria Maisto echoed the call for a stronger labor movement in which educators join with other workers to demand not only fair wages and safe working conditions but increased job security for all.

Addressing issues of college service and shared governance, Michelle Masse identified service as a "si-

lent economy in higher education" and urged faculty to participate fully in shared governance and other forms of college service but not to be exploited. She urged us to resist the lure of seeing ourselves as professionals and instead to see ourselves as workers, and encouraged us to take on the hard work of becoming centrally involved in college- and university-wide decision-making processes. "Read those key documents," she suggested, to find out what campus governing bodies are charged with doing and what they are actually doing.

Cary Nelson advocated on behalf of protecting academic freedom and tenure, issuing a sort of manifesto, the "Faculty Agenda for Hard Times." Among his exhortations were to "celebrate collaborative campus decision-making," to publicly promote the interests and needs of students, to forge coalitions with students groups and other groups of workers on campus, and to "conquer our fears" about an uncertain future through collective action.

Murray Sperber, discussing the effects on college enrollment patterns of the abolition of affirmative action, noted the relative absence of people of color from the day's proceedings and challenged us all to work toward greater ethnic diversity throughout our public education institutions.

Perhaps the most resounding words of the afternoon, spoken to galvanize, were these: "Union membership is like gym membership: nothing happens unless you do something."

Si, se puede! ■

THE NEXT GENERATION CLASSROOM

An interview about The City Farm Project

Robyn Waxman has been teaching in the Graphic Communication Department at Sacramento City College since 1996. During the Fall 2007 to Spring 2009, she completed her Master's in Fine Arts at California College of the Arts with a thesis entitled "Rethinking Protest: A Designer's Role in the Next Generation of Collective Action". Partially as a continuation of this work, she has received a Type "B" sabbatical during

the spring 2011 semester entitled "Institutionalizing Sustainability at SCC: Campus Garden". She serves as the Coordinator of Design Education for the Designers Accord, and is on the Executive Board for the LRCFT. Her recent work with the next generation has been featured in Fast Company Magazine, The SF MOMA, San Francisco Chronicle, KPFA radio, Communication Arts Magazine, and Print Magazine.



photos: San Francisco urban farm project

UN: HOW WILL STARTING A CAMPUS GARDEN AT SCC HELP TO INSTITUTIONALIZE SUSTAINABILITY?

The campus garden, otherwise known as the City Farm Project, is one leaf (excuse the pun) of a greater sustainability movement on campus. Others before me, like SCC's Craig Davis, successfully initiated and instituted campus recycling years ago. Our new campus construction follows LEED certification and years ago our Curriculum Committee went digital and stopped the printing of thousands of photocopies for each meeting.

I want to point out that sustainability is not **only** "green" movement-type activities. We might at first think of the City Farm Project as a way to grow food locally, to beautify, and as a place to convert food scraps and leaves on campus into compost. But I am thinking of this project as more than a "green" gesture. When I define sustainability, I include cultural, social, and economic equality issues. City Farm could provide opportunity for faculty to address sustainability issues in a way that engages actively and experientially with students. Students could experiment with ideas, add tangibility to abstract concepts from lecture, and collaborate with other students and with other disciplines. City Farm addresses sustainability from a holistic point of view, even suggesting a more sustainable vision of **how** we teach.

UN: CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF HOW CITY FARM WOULD BE USED TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN CULTURAL, SOCIAL, OR ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES?

In conversations with several staff and students on campus, history professor Riad Bahur described City Farm as "a way to address food in history and to illustrate a concept like "new world" crops through a planting and harvesting during one semester. The physical land could also benefit discussions of capitalism and agribusiness and responses to some of the world's economic and environmental problems and less obvious *costs*."

In Sociology, Professor Nich Miller described City Farm as a way to "engage with and support proj-

ects related to alternative economic models and discussions of culture (and its various aspects), labor, stratification, globalization, etc. The project could assist students in rethinking the use of public and social space."

Art classes growing their own dye garden and math classes learning about probability and statistics through planting seeds and seeing what percentage grow are examples of adding tangibility to abstract concepts— we could begin to expand and enrich the material we teach with the interaction in this space, making learning more experiential, more memorable, and more engaging.

UN: YOU'VE BEEN TEACHING AT SCC IN GRAPHIC COMMUNICATION FOR 15 YEARS. YOU'VE ALSO RECENTLY EARNED YOUR MFA IN DESIGN. WHAT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO GARDENING OR TO FOOD?

If you asked me this question two years ago, I would have been hard pressed to find a connection. I never had a plant survive my care before 2009, when I helped establish a food-producing garden in San Francisco, the first of the two (Millennial-focused) urban gardens I founded that year.

While in graduate school, I set out to rethink the way the youth of the U.S. practice the age-old tradition of dissent. This next generation coming of age (The Millennial Generation) conducts their lives differently than my generation, and many of the generations before me. They collaborate. They participate. They obey authority, yet they demand transparency and to hear both sides of any debate. In general you won't find this generation coming en masse to the Capitol Mall in protest of the tuition fee hikes. Many critics think they are just not engaged—even lazy with their mobile and digital lives—but many feel as though they can only watch from the "sidelines" ... that their possible actions won't affect anything.

For my graduate school thesis, I experimented with design's role in connecting with the Millennials in an effort to **publicly** and **productively** make their opinions known... to take matters into their own hands... and to visually expose what they felt was unjust. In other words, I looked at design's role in rethinking a traditional protest for

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the Millennial Generation. This new-fangled protest took the form of a food-producing garden on toxic land in Potrero Hill in San Francisco. The “mob” of young people working there would donate half their yields to low-income and homeless food agencies in San Francisco, while simultaneously remediating the toxic land. Please read an article about this project in the San Francisco MOMA blog: <http://blog.sfmoma.org/2009/06/the-garden-as-protest>

I’ve found urban gardening to be an effective way to connect with Millennials and recently I’ve discovered that it can serve to augment a four-walled Graphic Communication classroom. I’m excited about the many ways that even graphic design students could use this space to test ideas and to learn about the power of design. I would like to find a way for any discipline on campus to engage with this land.

UN: WHAT WILL CITY FARM BE, IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS, ONE YEAR FROM TODAY?

My hope is that first of all, SCC will approve of its installation. (We are in the middle of our second draft proposal.) But assuming that it is approved ... one year from now, I can see a City Farm Club assisting the Child Development Center to help preschoolers grow their own food. I can imagine several classes adopting land plots in this 2,000 square foot area and our attrition rates dropping. I can imagine cutting edge, experimental curriculum—the stuff that other schools reference when they’re trying to push up against old educational paradigms. I can see us offering programming that engages people in food-land issues and moves people to change their kid’s public school lunch program. I can see a whole generation of SCC students who leave the powerless “sidelines” and directly engage in the way they learn and in how they pass the torch to the generation that follows. ■

If you’re interested in learning more about how the City Farm Project can change your teaching, please contact Robyn: waxmanr@scc.losrios.edu

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