

Chapter 3: Chicano Commencement and the Walkout



Historical Background:

In the late 1960s, Mexican American students were frustrated that there were so few Chicano students at San José State. At the time, the Mexican American population was 17% in San José, but Mexican American were less than 1% of the student body. The Mexican American students that did attend San José State struggled financially, and they lacked the necessary support structure to be successful.ⁱ

Upset by the lack of representation on campus, the Student Initiative, a Chicano student organization, developed a proposal to recruit more students. The student plan, which was endorsed by the then President Robert Clark, included recruiting Chicano students at local high schools, with a particular interest in the East Side Union High School District. However, the district administration was hostile to the students' recruitment plan. After several confrontations between the students and principals, the Community Service Organization (CSO)—a non-profit organization committed to the empowerment of Mexican Americans, and who had trained Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta—convinced the district to allow the students to recruit during lunch and after school.ⁱⁱ

In addition to recruiting, the student plan focused on having San José State accept more Mexican American students. In the spring of 1967, the Student Initiative worked with President Clark on a plan to admit 12 Chicano students using a special admissions program of the CSU system, which allowed schools to admit 2% of all students as "special admission". And while the dominant culture thought that the program had been created to let students of color into college, in reality, it had been created by the state of California for athletes and wealthy students who had low GPAs, as well as other people the college wanted to admit.ⁱⁱⁱ

After all 12 Chicano students completed the fall semester of 1967 with a 3.0 GPA or higher, the students advocated for President Clark to significantly increase the number of Mexican American students admitted under the special admissions program. After reviewing the students' proposal, President Clark agreed to admit 250 Chicano students. However, the proposal needed the approval of Chancellor Glenn Dumke of the California State University system, which he refused to give. In response, the students educated the campus and larger community about Chancellor Dumke's refusal to provide access to more Chicano students, and they began to plan a bold action.^{iv}

The Events:

To draw attention to the injustice of having so few Chicano students at San José State, and the decision by the Chancellor to reject the students plan to increase the number of Mexican American students for the incoming class of 1968, the students decided to walk out of the university graduation. Out of a graduating class of 2,000 students, only 29 had Spanish surnames, with eight of these being athletes from other countries who had been recruited to San José State. Despite being just a few students—not by their fault but rather by a system that had excluded them—eleven Chicano students, along with 15 White students and seven White professors, walked out of the commencement just as President Clark was to address the graduating class.^v On the day of the graduation, 200 campus and city police officers surrounded Spartan Stadium as the university and city thought that the students' disruption would lead to violence. However, there was no violence; the students just peacefully walked out of the stadium as they said they were going to do. As the students walked out, one of

the Chicano student mother's cried out (incorrectly): "No...Don't give up your degree!" A few people booed. President Clark responded to the walkout by telling the audience that he was sympathetic to the students' peaceful demonstration since the California State University (CSU) system and society in general needed to provide more justice to Mexican Americans.

After walking out of the graduation, the students walked across 10th Street to an open part of the track field, where they held one of the first Chicano Commencement celebrations in the United States. Greeting the students and their families was Luis Valdéz, a San José State alum, and his Teatro Campesino, as well as Dr. Octavio Romano from the University of California, and over 200 supporters. The Teatro Campesino put on a play entitled "Chicano Commencement" and there were passionate speeches, with each student being given the opportunity to speak. Juan Garcia, a first-year student who attended the event, and who went on to become a professor at Fresno State, thought to himself, "Hey! We should have a separate commencement every year. I was that inspired." This protest led directly to the creation of the Equal Opportunity Program the following year, which was developed to help recruit and graduate Chicano and African American students.^{vi}

A second Chicano Commencement was organized three years later by the students. However, they decided not to disrupt the commencement, but rather to have their own separate commencement. Chris Jimenez, a student leader stated, "You shouldn't spoil someone else's party for your own...Let's have our own." The 1971 Chicano Commencement was held at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San José, which was where Cesar Chavez worshipped and where he held many of his community organizing meetings. Instead of a protest, 30 students and their families gathered to recognize the accomplishments of the graduates, to honor their parents and the sacrifices they had made, and to inspire the sisters and brothers of the graduates to obtain a college education. Jimenez felt that, "[T]he highlight for me was the families jumping up and down and shouting when the graduates went up for their diplomas. It became a shouting match between families, they were so proud and happy." A few years later, Mexican American student leaders abandoned their separatist perspective, and decided to encourage students to attend both the main graduation ceremony and the Chicano Commencement. Soon after, the university embraced the event.

At the same time, not all are happy with the decision to not make a political statement with Chicano Commencement. Armando Valdez, a student who had participated in the first Chicano Commencement, and who would go on to become a behavioral scientist in Mountain View, stated, "It became a celebration and not a political occasion...I would rather have seen continued protest. The reality is, little has changed for Chicanos in this society." Jimenez remembers that, "They called us all sorts of names, vendidos, 'sellouts'...What did they do other than protest. Our philosophy was education. If you want social change, you need educated people." And Christina Ramos, a student organizer who had just completed a master's degree in Public Administration thinks that while Chicano Commencement had lost its political edge for a while, the anti-immigrant sentiment in the country has re-energized it. Ramos stated "It is still a political statement...We as Latinos are still not viewed as positive contributors to society. But we are still here. We are making a difference. We are graduating from college."

Finally, Gabe Reyes, a student organizer of the 1971 event and who later became the SJSU Special Assistant to the President for Campus Diversity, wonders whether if by joining the institution they wanted to change, they became co-opted by it, and changed little to nothing, stating, "It was a question we all wrestled with." Gabe went on to lead the effort to build on campus the César E. Chávez Monument: Arch of Dignity, Equality and Justice, since he wanted to recognize Chavez, who had started his community organizing in San José and was a frequent speaker on campus. Interestingly, it was a group of SJSU Sociology students that first connected Cesar Chavez to Fred Ross, who was the founder of the CSO, and who helped train Cesar to be a community organizer.^{vii} In 2018, SJSU's Chicano Commencement celebrated its 50th anniversary, and today, it is common for over 2,000 people to attend this important event.^{viii}



Resources

- Revisiting the 1968 Chicano Commencement Symposium, October 11, 2019, https://vimeo.com/365812673?fbclid=IwAR2_XklbjtVibpAkbXuYxN7OHwGR312SEsoAv9vD7pHsZgOnmGCF37QToAE (accessed September 5, 2021)
- CBS news story, “1960s-Era Chicano Student Activists Celebrate Historic SJSU Graduation Protest” October 11, 2019, <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2019/10/11/1960s-era-chicano-student-activists-celebrate-historic-sjsu-graduation-protest> (accessed September 5, 2021)

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- ⁱ Humberto Garza, *Organizing the Chicano Movement: The Story of CSO*, E-book (Sun House, 2009),
- ⁱⁱ Garza, *Organizing the Chicano Movement*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Garza, *Organizing the Chicano Movement*.
- ^{iv} Garza, *Organizing the Chicano Movement*.
- ^v Garza, *Organizing the Chicano Movement*; Joe Rodriguez, “After 40 Years, Give or Take a Few, Chicano Commencement Endures”, *San Jose Mercury News*, May 28, 2010, www.mercurynews.com/2010/05/28/after-40-years-give-or-take-a-few-chicano-commencement-endures/ (accessed October 3, 2017).
- ^{vi} Garza, *Organizing the Chicano Movement*; Rodriguez, “After 40 Years, Give or Take a Few, Chicano Commencement Endures”.
- ^{vii} **Garza**, *Organizing the Chicano Movement*; Rodriguez, “After 40 Years, Give or Take a Few, Chicano Commencement Endures”.
- ^{viii} Rodriguez, “After 40 Years, Give or Take a Few, Chicano Commencement Endures”.