



# Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

## Research Briefs

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### 50<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversaries: Historical Lessons of Chicana/o Student Activism in Los Angeles, CA

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In the spring of 2018, two anniversaries were commemorated in the history of Chicana/o/x<sup>1</sup> student activism in Los Angeles, California: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 Blowouts and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1993 hunger strike for a Chicana/o Studies department at UCLA. Although separated by time and space (the blowouts were in Eastern Los Angeles and UCLA is in Westwood) both events are part of a broader history of resistance, demonstrating that Students of Color are historically committed to resisting racial inequality in educational institutions. For example, in 1951, Barbara Johns organized Black students in a walkout to protest separate and unequal schooling conditions in Farmville, Virginia (Turner, 2004) and in 1968, the Third World Liberation Front led strikes to establish the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University and the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley (Muñoz, 2007). We situate these historical examples of student activism within the field of Critical Race Theory in Education, as examples of transformational resistance, because of the students' critique of oppression and commitment to social justice (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The student activists of the '68 Blowouts and the '93 hunger strike brought change to Los Angeles and beyond, inspiring future generations of students to demand social justice in their schools and communities.

#### 1968 EAST L.A. BLOWOUTS

The 1968 East L.A. Blowouts (or Walkouts as they are simultaneously known) were centered at five predominately Chicana/o/x high schools<sup>2</sup> and took place within the context of the anti-war movement and international student movements. For many years prior to the Blowouts, East Los Angeles community members made unsuccessful attempts to create change and improve the inferior education system through the "proper" channels (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The Blowouts started on different days at the different schools during the first week of March, with students boycotting for a week and a half and estimates of 10,000-20,000 students protesting the inferior quality of education. The planning and implementation of each school walkout took on a distinct character as did the response by school administrations and the police. While the student walkouts on some campuses were peaceful or had mild incidents of violence, Roosevelt students experienced severe police violence. On March 11, the students presented to the School Board a list of 36 demands, including the end to corporal punishment, access to bilingual/bicultural education, hiring of Chicana/o faculty and staff, and the development of Mexican American Studies curriculum (McCurdy, 1968). One of the results of the Blowouts was that it placed a spotlight on the unequal schooling conditions for Chicana/o/x students while also questioning

the Eurocentric curriculum that omitted Chicanas/os/x. The event plays a crucial role in the Chicana/o/x movement, the broader struggle for educational equity, and student activism in the Southwest. Indeed, it immediately galvanized walkouts throughout the Southwest and inspired a legacy of student protests that have used similar tactics.

### **1993 HUNGER STRIKE FOR CHICANA/O STUDIES AT UCLA**

The demands students made in 1993 at UCLA included unfinished business from the demands of 1968. Although Chicana/o Studies existed at UCLA as an interdepartmental program, the major was recommended for suspension in 1990 after failing to recruit enough students. The failing major was attributed to a starving structure that maintained the major inaccessible to students (Aguilar-Hernández, 2016). The response from students in MEChA was to demand department structure for Chicana/o Studies to ensure that it thrive. This demand was met with challenges and tensions, as administrators were initially unsupportive. Students used various strategies to demand a department: coalition building, community outreach, townhalls, rallies, vigils, conferences, lobbying with administrators, and the drafting of proposals for a department. The strategies shifted on May 11 when a group

of diverse students (organized by the Conscious Students of Color) staged a sit-in at the UCLA Faculty Center to demand more funding for the Ethnic Studies libraries. Ninety-nine students were arrested and 83 of those students were sent to jail. On May 25, 1993, nine individuals<sup>3</sup> committed to a hunger strike in Schoenberg Quad, directly in front of Chancellor Young's office window, demanding a Chicana/o Studies department. After 14 days of a water only hunger strike, Chancellor Young and the strikers signed an agreement to establish the César E. Chávez Center for Interdisciplinary Instruction in Chicana and Chicano Studies. The center became a department in 2005.

### **HISTORICAL IMPACT OF CHICANA/O/X STUDENT ACTIVISM**

During the 1960s and 1990s the racial climate in California was tense, as illustrated by the rise of social movements invested in racial justice. The Blowouts and hunger strike prove that Students of Color are invested in school reform; they are part of the historical struggle to implement Chicana/o/x Studies and Ethnic Studies in California schools from K-16. Today, more than 20 California school districts including LAUSD require Ethnic Studies for graduation and AB2016 requires the development of Ethnic Studies curriculum for all

high schools. Research proves that there is a strong correlation between Ethnic Studies and an increase in graduation rates and college readiness for students who enroll in Ethnic Studies courses (Cabrera et. al, 2013; Dee & Penner, 2017). Yet, Ethnic Studies and Chicana/o/x Studies are stagnant on many college campuses and often face budget cuts. Echoing the student demands of '68 and '93, we see the institutionalization, support, adequate funding, and inclusion of student voices in Chicana/o/x and Ethnic Studies in K-16 as necessary to continue to support the academic success of Students of Color.

### **STUDENT ACTIVISM: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

Student activism is a space to develop critical consciousness and bring change to schools, communities, and individuals. Both student movements discussed here were complex. Students were challenged by and resisted societal and institutional forms of racial inequality while also experiencing, upholding, and challenging sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Although queer, trans, and gender non-conforming Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x are members of our communities, they have experienced discrimination within Chicana/o/x organizing spaces, proving that social inequality impacts

everyone, including within social justice spaces (Blackwell, 2011).

In the Blowouts and the hunger strike, women and queer students were vital leaders to the movements, although they have not been given enough recognition in historical texts. While inequality within social movements persists today, historically, student activists have engaged in serious efforts to challenge inequality related to gender and sexuality. Today, women, queer, trans, and gender non-conforming students are often recognized for leading student activist movements such as the UndocuQueer Movement and the Mexican American Studies Movement in Tucson, Arizona.<sup>4</sup>

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Chicana/o/x student activism is central to social change within schools and society at large. Today, similar to the 60s and 90s, we are in a period of intense racial tension and a climate that fosters white supremacy and anti-Latina/o/x discourses, actions, and policies. Student activists stand on the shoulders of activists who left a strong legacy for social change. We see the value of ongoing transgenerational dialogues where we recognize and honor the knowledge and expertise within current students and where past student activists offer

their experiences, resources, and legitimacy to the causes students take on. For example, we see current students building on past strategies by extending their organizing efforts with essential social media and other virtual strategies. Further, current students are demanding reform for undocumented immigrants, specifically via a clean Dream Act that would allow undocumented immigrants a pathway to legalization. As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, we see student activism and Chicana/o/x Studies as spaces where inequality continues to be exposed, resisted and transformed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the limited gendered dichotomy that the Spanish language creates, and we use the term Chicana/o/x as we speak about these two historical examples, acknowledging that during the 1960s and 1990s the more commonly used terms were Chicano and/or Chicana/o. As we speak about the present and future we use Chicana/o/x to be inclusive of all genders across a spectrum of varied identities and use Chicana/o only when historical specificity is needed.

<sup>2</sup> The five Los Angeles Unified School District high schools included Lincoln, Roosevelt, Garfield, Belmont and Wilson and were located on the eastside of Los Angeles. However, several other middle and high schools joined in the walkouts including Jefferson and Venice high schools.

<sup>3</sup> The strikers included: Juan Arturo Diaz López, Marcos Aguilar, Balvina Collazo, María M. Lara, Dr. Jorge R. Mancillas, Cindy Montañez, Norma Montañez, and Joaquin Manuel Ochoa.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://mailchi.mp/7da061428d87/mas-womens-plaza-honorees-campaign-project>

## RESOURCES

For pedagogical tools please see the following films, activities, and talks.

### 1968 Blowouts:

- Galán, H. (Producer). (1996). *Chicano! The history of the Mexican American civil rights movement: Taking back the schools* [documentary]. United States: NLCC Educational Media.
- Esparza, M. (Producer), & Olmos, E. J. (Director). (2006). *Walkout* [motion picture]. United States: Esparza/Katz Productions, Olmos Productions, HBO Films, and Maya Pictures.
- Teaching Activity: "Pump up the Blowouts: Reflections on the 40th Anniversary of the Chicano/a School Blowouts" by Gilda L. Ochoa. Zinn Education Project: <https://zinnedproject.org/materials/pump-up-the-blowouts/>

### UCLA Hunger Strike:

- Serna, E. [Username]. (2015, April 12). *Nuestros Esfuerzos* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/Nya73cXVK2Y>

## RESOURCES CONT.

- UCLA [Username]. (2010, February 24). *Celebrating 40 Years of Ethnic Studies at UCLA* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/uTaLZY4SmFI>
- UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center [Username]. (2013, July 31). *Mujeres in the Movement for Chicana/o Studies at UCLA* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4D2G3ae2Ym4>

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Blackwell, M. (2011). ¡Chicana power!: Contested histories of feminism in the Chicano movement. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

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Dee, T. S. and Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Association Journal*, 54(1), 127-166.

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Turner, K. M. (2004). Both victors and victims: Prince Edward County, Virginia, the NAACP, and "Brown." *Virginia Law Review*, 90(6), 1667-1691.

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