



INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIETAL ISSUES

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While the streets of the State of California and the nation are teeming with protestors demanding greater attention to matters of racial justice, it has come to my attention that the Berkeley campus administration has made the astonishing decision to defund and shutter the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues. This decision is being made in the midst of the most important, painful and challenging discussions about systemic racism, inequality and injustice that we have had in half a century - all issues to which the Institute has made substantial and continuing contributions. Just as Berkeley is the flagship campus of the ten campus system, so the Institute (ISSI) is now (and has been for four decades) the flagship of all research units system-wide – in training and producing Ph.Ds. of the under-served populations of the state.¹ I have attached a full report that documents that assessment but will provide here a brief synopsis of the relevant history of the Institute. *As a vital point, the singular strength of the Graduate Fellows Program has always been its integration with the ongoing research projects of the Institute.*

During the turbulent period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the campus (and the entire UC system) did not have a single research institute with the mandate to study racial stratification. In that period of turmoil, there was a fledgling start-up (Institute for Race and Community Relations) that never was able to gain a toe-hold, in part because of the absence of faculty with the right mix of a) expertise in the area of racial stratification and b) a willingness to serve as Director. As an interim measure, the Dean of the Graduate Division, Sandy Elberg, appointed a graduate student in Social Welfare to the position of Acting Director. This was an untenable situation since faculty chose not to bring their research projects into an institutional structure headed by a graduate student. Rather than shuttering the IRCR in such a period of racial turmoil, Dean Elberg persuaded me to take the position of Director, with the full commitment of the campus to fund its infrastructure. We negotiated an agreement that the new Institute would both broaden its

mandate and change its name, with a commitment to research training for young scholars focused on broad structural forces addressing racial stratification.

The new research unit would become the Institute for the Study of Social Change. A vital feature of the Graduate Fellows Program (GFP) was the required integration of graduate students, rotating into the various research projects. Each student would rotate for several months between the various research centers, thereby insuring not only a diversified but integrated research experience, but also generating a rich basis of sharing and commonality among and between trainees. Although modified over the years, that has remained a central and codifying element. Currently, that means integration with the “spokes”, for example, of the Center for Research on Native American Issues, the Center for Ethnographic Studies, the Latinx Research Center, and the Center for Right Wing Studies. To close the Institute and thereby isolate this program as an independent unit is to destroy its greatest strength. To invoke a metaphor that is unfortunately apt, this decision would cut off the breath of the GFP. More on that shortly.

Now we come to the key development in the history of this Institute most relevant to the current situation. In the early 1980s, the new Reagan Administration pursued a vigorous assault on research programs at the National Institutes of Health that were focused on social issues relevant to health outcomes. I received a site visit from sympathetic colleagues at the NIMH who said that while the research training program was rated very highly by peer reviewed panels, that program would have funding cut unless there was a more narrowly directed focus on the bio-medical causes of mental illness. The new directive required that psychiatrists and medical doctors join the training – with less of a focus on social and environmental forces. But I had been a member of President Carter’s Research Task Force on Mental Health in the late 1970s, and had critiqued how this very development diverted attention from the systemic and structural elements of racism that are now so painfully playing out in the vulnerability of different population groups to the Covid-19 pandemic. (There is now an abundance of empirical evidence that links racism to mental stress, documented in the recently published work of David Williams.)

I explained the new and bleak funding situation to both Dean Elberg and then Vice Chancellor Michael Heyman. After failed negotiations with federal officials at the NIH, Heyman and Elberg committed the Berkeley campus to restoring complete funding for the training program. The direct reason: the ISSC had been recognized as the leading unit in the United States, unmatched by any university in the nation (see the attached) in producing Ph.Ds from underserved populations of Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. That funding support would continue for the next several decades, and would be enhanced during the tenure of David Gardner as President. In the ensuing years, that joint commitment between the Berkeley Campus and the UC Systemwide administration sealed a unique model of partnered funding support – the full measure of prioritized institutional commitment.

While the attached report documents how more than 160 Ph.Ds were nurtured through the Research Training Program, that does not begin to explain the kind of support that these students received through the ISSC (which later became the ISSI when it merged with the

Survey Research Center). These students have submitted strong testimonials of how they felt a new and warm collegial community at the ISSC. They routinely characterized it as far more welcoming than their home departments or colleges, where many felt isolated and often alone in pursuing topics related to systemic and structural racism. At the ISSC, they could join informal lunch sessions with such notable intellectuals as Paolo Freire, James Baldwin, and political figures such as Andrew Young and Jerry Brown. Many have described how their Ph.D. theses were re-shaped and honed, with careers launched that would “make a huge difference”.

A few good examples: Teresa Cordova, Director of the Great Cities Project, University of Illinois, Chicago; Pedro Noguera, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools; Victor Rios, Associate Dean of the Social Sciences at UC Santa Barbara; Joan Fujimura, President, Society for the Social Studies of Science; Annette Lareau, President of the American Sociological Association. I could go on, but one gets the picture. I am aware that there are now a few other units on campus that address these matters of racial stratification, but none have the capacity to match the achievements of the unique contributions of the ISSI documented in the attachments.

The Anna Head Complex is a historical landmark. To use the rationale to defund and close the ISSI on the grounds that there are insufficient funds to find another physical site masks what we should all know – that the budget is always an expression of institutional priorities. President Gardner and Chancellors Heyman and Tien made the ISSC a priority. In my many discussions with them, we noted comparisons such as how a single lab for a new faculty member in one of the natural sciences required far more amounts of funding than what the campus spends on an Institute dedicated to illuminating social, economic and political issues in this society. In my opening remarks, I indicated my astonishment at the decision to shutter this Institute when the nation is crying out for greater attention to foundational issues of systemic and structural racism. To shut it down in this moment risks being appropriately assessed at best as tone deaf, or worse as a deliberate statement of institutional priorities. I have tried to provide some history and evidence to indicate why this is precisely the area of research training and scholarship that should be provided increased support. And most particularly, I have tried to demonstrate how the Graduate Fellows Program is inextricably linked to the ISSI research units.

I hope that you will reconsider and reverse this decision, which threatens the standing of UC Berkeley as a center of research training for the next generation of scholars addressing racial inequities.

Sincerely,

Troy Duster
Chancellor’s Professor Emeritus

P.S. Given that the funding issue was central to the decision, could you please make public the other Organized Research Units on campus that are being shuttered?

Cc: Martin Sanchez Jankowski
Gus Newport

¹The Graduate Fellowship Program has supported the completion of doctorates by *at least* 160 Graduate Fellows from historically under-represented ethnic and racial groups (see Appendix). (The number of Graduate Fellows who completed their PhDs is even larger when white students are included.) This total includes 54 African Americans, 43 Latina/os, and 35 Asian Americans