

Restoring the Faculty Voice

Faculty members from the unions of public colleges from 21 states met this weekend in Los Angeles and committed to launching a campaign with a lofty goal: assuring the future of higher education.

Participants reviewed and many expressed support for a set of organizing principles contained in a draft document called "[Quality Higher Education for the 21st Century](#)" that was prepared by the California Faculty Association. It advocates for more scrupulous analysis of calls to reform higher education. "Wholesale embrace of change without careful thought and deliberation can take us in the wrong direction," the document states, "not toward reforming higher education but, in fact, toward deforming precisely those aspects of American higher education that have made it the envy of the world."

The document stakes out seven broad principles: increased inclusivity and access for students; a broad, diverse, liberal arts curriculum; less reliance on contingent as opposed to tenure-track faculty; incorporating technology with an eye toward maintaining educational quality; more judicious balancing of short-term cuts with long-term costs; better state support; and the adoption of evaluation metrics that go beyond graduation rates.

The details of the campaign that will come -- whether it will be aimed at policy makers, college administrators, the public more broadly, or all three -- still remain to be hashed out. But the consensus that emerged on the principles during what was essentially a daylong meeting of 70 people who had never met before was remarkable, according to several organizers and participants who spoke Sunday with *Inside Higher Ed*.

"It was amazingly productive," said Lillian Taiz, professor of history at California State University at Los Angeles and president of the CFA, which represents faculty members and others in the California State University System. "For one full

day of work, I'm frankly over the moon about the level of commitment."

All agreed that it is imperative to restore the faculty's voice to the larger conversation about the academy's future -- a conversation from which they acknowledge they and their students have largely been absent. The result of that absence has been a flurry of cost-cutting measures and program closures whose consequences to students and the institutions have not been sufficiently thought through, they said.

Taiz and others repeatedly invoked their students, worrying that they were already being shut out of classes when course selections have been slashed, or were being priced out altogether by rising tuition.

If there was a reason for the quick agreement in principle of such a broad array of faculty members, it was the commonality of the dire straits in which they and their institutions find themselves. At the meeting were members of faculty unions from urban and rural campuses, and research institutions and community colleges from Arizona to Washington. Though the participants were more accustomed to hashing out concerns on their own campuses or in their respective statehouses, they took turns describing the state of public higher education in similarly dark terms: at a tipping point, on the brink or in jeopardy. "We all agreed we're at a crossroads," said Taiz.

"It was really astonishing how similar our crises are," said Eileen Landy, secretary of the faculty union for the State University of New York, and associate professor of sociology at SUNY College at Old Westbury. New York's system has seen [\\$1.1 billion in cuts](#) over the past three years, while California projects slashing \$1.4 billion from higher education next year alone.

Even in states where the cuts are smaller in terms of raw numbers, the risk of damage is just as real, said Rachel Roiblat, assistant professor at the

University of Nebraska at Omaha's Grace Abbott School of Social Work, and an officer in the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors. She said that even a \$5 million cut in her school could lead to the elimination of programs.

But Roiblatt added that the aggregate risk of such cuts was greater. A quality higher education is a force for social mobility and the best means to realize the American Dream, she said. Students today sense that this option is growing less attainable for them. "Students today want to have the same opportunity their grandparents did with the GI bill," said Roiblatt.

Though faculty members, administrators and even public officials have argued that higher education confers both personal and public good (including [Governor Andrew Cuomo](#), who recently praised the SUNY system's contribution to local and regional economic development), fiscal reality has been unflinchingly bleak. State support for public higher education has decreased 2 percent over the past two years, according to [the latest report](#) from the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University and the State Higher Education Executive Officers. And more cuts are on the way.

And yet, the draft document prepared by the CFA advocates for *more* public investment in higher education. While this position is politically difficult, it represents sound policy, several faculty members said. "The irony is that not investing is dangerous for the future," said Landy.

Some argued that cost efficiencies could be better realized in places other than the classroom, such as administration. When colleges put less than 50 percent of their budgets into what goes on in class, it is, said Taiz, "plain, flat-out crazy."

Another place to cut might be sports, or new facilities projects, some said. Roiblatt pointed to the \$38 million renovation of a health, physical education and recreation building featuring space on her campus for student health services, fitness centers, a jogging track, gyms, locker rooms, café and classrooms. "The institution seems to have plenty of money for edifices," she said. "It seems like that is never questioned -- even when the dollars are enormous."

The next steps for the campaign are for the participants to return to their campuses, circulate the CFA's draft document of principles, and continue communicating with each other online and over the phone to shape the campaign, according to Taiz. "Stay tuned," she said.

In addition to California, Nebraska, and New York, states with union representatives at this weekend's meeting included Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

— [Dan Berrett](#)