

Newly formed group fights for education

By EZEKIEL HERNANDEZ * April 10, 2012

The landscape of college education has changed in recent years, riddled with the recession and budget cuts across all public sectors. Cal State Fullerton is a prime example as one of the largest campuses in the CSU. The change has been a national topic of debate for public education funding.

In five years, the cost to attend Cal State Fullerton as an undergraduate, as well as other public universities in California, has increased from \$2,772 to \$5,472.

In response, student and faculty groups from around the country and from California have banded together in protest of how higher education is being handled by today's leaders. Much of the criticism from these groups is being directed toward certain lawmakers who are said to be holding educational funding low on their priority list. Another criticism stems from school administrators who allegedly disregard student voices when making decisions for their institutions.

The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education (CFHE) is a relatively new organization formed in 2011 to tackle discrepancies in education funding. Today, it has backing from student groups and teacher unions all over the United States. Its purpose is to form a collective effort between unions and advocacy groups for a forum in the decision-making process.

"It's a grassroots effort to bring attention to the needs of higher education," said Ron Norton Reel, president of the Community College Association in California.

The CFHE was formed in Los Angeles at a meeting of faculty groups looking to organize for reform. The California Faculty Association (CFA) was an integral part of the nationwide organization process.

"The CFA deserves thanks for putting together this national campaign. I think it's 58 organizations now, but there are also staff unions. My union represents CSU academic support staff," said Steve Teixeira of Academic Professionals of California, a union of workers from programs like the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and financial aid in the CSU system, among others.

According to the CFHE website, the organization is intended to "include the voices of the faculty, students and our communities — not just administrators, politicians, foundations and think tanks — in the process of making change."

The concern is that funding for public education, given its current trajectory, will become unattainable to lower-income students who have no choice but to seek public institutions in order to afford a college education.

"Clearly, funding is an important part of making sure that we can provide affordable and accessible quality of higher education," said

Brian Ferguson, a communications officer for the California Faculty Association.

The movement toward accessible education has been tied to the recent Occupy Wall Street movement, and the two movements share affiliations with various advocacy groups.

The problem that ties CFHE advocates to the Occupy movement is the argument that the top-tier earners of the American economy are not doing their proper part in paying taxes.

Allegedly, common practice among America's elite is to park monies in other countries to avoid domestic taxes. Many supporters for education funding see this as a detriment to students and their ability to contribute to the domestic economy.

"It's no surprise to say that we're facing a fiscal crisis in state and federal government ... Yet it's not that there's no money in America. We're the biggest economy on Earth, and California is the 10th biggest economy on Earth out of all the countries," Teixeira said. "What has happened is we've allowed government policies ... to shift so that the highest income groups don't pay the way they used to; even under Governor Reagan they used to pay higher taxes."

A publicized report from the CFHE shows there was a new sense of optimism when Gov. Jerry Brown was sworn in, with the expectation that he might restore funding to public schools. "It seems that the new mantra is raise the tuition and the students will pay it, and therefore the state's obligation is less and less each year," Reel said.

The issue of cutting funding is becoming more widespread, according to the CFHE. What was once solely a state university issue has now become a widespread issue in most community colleges in the state. Last week, a culmination of this frustration boiled over at Santa Monica City College. After being denied entrance to a public Board of Trustees meeting, police pepper-sprayed students who were trying to enter in protest of funding issues.

Teixeira has attended national conferences with faculty groups through the CFHE. He said the problem is not just in California.

"You hear about this in Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan and Ohio — the same pattern of raising student fees, cutting enrollment, too few classes," Teixeira said. "You realize that the biggest economy on Earth can do better than this, so why aren't we?"