

WHY A CHICANO COMMENCEMENT?

Keynote Speech at the 21st Annual Chicano Commencement
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I want to congratulate the organizers of the 21st Annual Chicano Commencement for all their hard work and for keeping the flame alive, once again, in putting on an event which is exclusively a San Jose State University tradition. An event which is rooted in the Chicano student movement of the 1960's and 1970's in San Jose.

I also want to offer my congratulations to the graduates and their families, for they have endured and responded successfully to the academic challenge of a university education. Both student and parent, student and spouse, are exemplary role models to the rest of our community in what can be accomplished when there is support, when sacrifice is mutual, and when the long haul is more valued than the immediate goal of just getting a job. These graduates do not want mere jobs, they want CAREERS! The song "Stand By Me" has even more meaning when applied to students who need support, guidance, and reinforcement from their love ones. Having been in education 20 years, I've seen too many sad examples of highly talented latinos fighting against the demons of discouragement and criticisms from friends, and even members of family, for choosing education as a means of realizing their dreams. What we have before us here, however, is the obvious and more ideal example of family support, positive reinforcement, and pride in achievement---we need to extend this kind of supportive spirit to the rest of our community.

Presentation of Theme

It is an honor for me to have been given the opportunity to be your keynote speaker today, for I stood on a similar platform in June 1971, the year we first formalized the Chicano Commencement. One can say that we "institutionalized" it then as a form of celebration for our graduates and the community.

We never knew or realized at the time that such an event would continue for so long. Year after year, graduates come and go, but somehow, someone, feels strongly compelled to put this event on. Year after year, graduates come and participate--no one, outside of yourselves, perhaps, will remember who was here today.

And who is to remember the organizers and the graduates who participated in the Chicano Commencements of 1975, 1980, 1985, or 1991? It may not even be important---what is important is that we're HERE! For that same collective community spirit that embodied the organizers of previous commencements is the same spirit that has motivated (moved) us to join together once again.

That is my theme for today: Why A Chicano Commencement? I believe every so often it is necessary to examine the antecedents of why we do what we do. Especially the very historical premises--the context--behind a uniquely San Jose student tradition: The Chicano Commencement. And this is what I'd like to discuss with you in the few moments that I have.

Very bluntly, the Chicano Commencement was organized as a protest against San Jose State University for what we felt was their lack of responsiveness to the educational needs of the Mexican American/Latino community. The first massive protest against the ineptitude and insensitivity of the CSU system, particularly San Jose State University, took place in 1968---where as many as 1000 Chicanos protested the SJSU Commencement exercises outside Spartan Stadium. In June 1968, the number of Chicano graduates barely numbered in the teens. Many of the protestors spilled into Spartan Stadium and demanded to be included in the program and be allowed to speak to the graduates, especially the Chicano graduates, to walkout and boycott the graduation ceremonies. For in the eyes of the protestors, the SJSU Commencement was a testament to the farce and hypocrisy of an institution which had failed in its mission to provide greater educational access of higher education to Mexican Americans/Latinos.

These were emotional times! You must understand the reality of that period in order to appreciate the course of action taken by those students and community activists.

When I indicated earlier that the Chicano Commencement was rooted in the Chicano student movement at SJSU I was partially correct. More accurately, it is rooted in the Chicano Movement in San Jose.

It is unfortunate that we sometimes lose sight that San Jose was, indeed, an important "Mecca" (of sorts) for Chicano activism and social change throughout the Southwest. San Jose established many "firsts" in the areas of program development, educational innovation, and artistic achievements.

Examples of "Firsts":

-The first Mexican American Graduate Studies Department (MAGSD) in the nation was established at SJSU--other universities followed our lead several years later.

-The first MSW program with specific emphasis on the biculturalism/bilingualism of Mexican Americans/Latinos was developed at SJSU.

-Among the first "Chicano EOP" programs in the CSU/UC systems was established at SJSU.

- The first public administration program specifically designed for training Spanish Speaking public administrators was implemented through the MAGSD at SJSU (ISSPA)--and the ISSPA curriculum has been used as a model by other institutions.

-The birthplace of El Teatro Campesino was in San Jose, where Luis Valdez, a James Lick High School graduate, performed his first major play as a senior at SJSU, "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa."

-Sal Si Puedes in San Jose gave us Cesar Chavez and the Community Service Organization (CSO). The CSO became the most important civil rights organization for Chicanos during the 1950's and a critical training ground for Cesar before his exodus to Delano and California History.

-San Jose also was the home of the foremost Chicano scholar-activist, Dr. Ernesto Galarza, who was a giant in our intellectual history.

San Jose also has an important history of activism, as stated earlier.

-The first Chicano student walkouts occurred in San Jose before the well publicized "LA Blowouts" in 1969. Hoover Jr. High School, which is no longer with us, had a walkout two years before (1967).

-The Chicano historian, Dr. Carlos Munoz of UC Berkeley, in his book, Youth, Identity, and Power: The Chicano Movement, admitted that the origins of the Chicano student movement in the Southwest took place at SJSU with the formation of SI (Student Initiative) in 1963. SI later became MASC (Mexican American Student Confederation) which was largely responsible for organizing the 1968 Chicano Commencement (protest) at Spartan Stadium.

It is no surprise, then, that the Chicano Commencement was organized and established HERE---and long after other groups and communities have abandoned their antecedents, or transformed their legacy of community struggle to the point where they can no longer recognize the very principles under which their struggle was founded, THIS Chicano Commencement will stand as a living testimony to our continuing cause for full equality, opportunity, and social justice.

Lest we forget or become oblivious to our own history, I'd like to share with you the premises under which the Chicano Commencement at San Jose State College. Instead, this June 5th 1971 we will have our OWN. This will be a Raza commencement, and probably the first separate, independent, Chicano planned, Chicano administered commencement ever held anywhere in the Southwest. But hopefully this will not be the first and only! Out of this one other commencements will arise. This is only the beginning."

"Why a Chicano Commencement? What are the objectives?"

1. To develop and express a closer tie between the Chicano student and the Chicano community, and to further verify the student's intention of "returning" to the community.
2. To demonstrate and communicate the "orgullo" which we have toward our Chicano graduates---and that only a Chicano commencement can do honor to this commemoration.
3. To gather and assemble Chicano graduates in one area so that they can more effectively express their concern and assert their unity in the interest of the community.
4. To initiate a conscious effort by creating a commencement that is relevant, conducive, and applicable to the students and the community---and that a precedent be set for the continuation of this event.
5. To indicate to that discriminatory element in the larger community that qualified and educated Chicanos do exist and that they are HERE and AVAILABLE."

*Taken from Que Tal! publication, May 1971. p.1

And you are here and available!! Yet we're constantly reminding institutions that if they look hard enough--and be more proactive in their search of Chicano/Latino hires, they'll be more successful in diversifying their institutions. It is not enough to resign to the argument--and sometimes we fall victims to it--"we can't find enough qualified Chicanos/Chicanas for fulltime teaching positions. They're just not available."

Two years ago, the Civic Affairs Committee of the San Jose GI Forum filed an EEOC grievance against SJSU for their poor record in hiring Mexican American/Latino professors and administrators. Actually, the hiring data indicated that SJSU had one of the worst records of educational/employment equity in the CSU system when it came to the hiring Mexican American/Latino professors. I was a member of the Civic Affairs Committee (San Jose GI Forum) which confronted the university administration. Others were Victor Garza, then San Jose GI Forum President, Humberto Garza, Sophie Mendoza, and Dan Campos (our chairperson).

What we learned at these meetings regarding SJSU's efforts to hire more Chicano/Latino professors was shameful! In our meetings with Dr. Gail Fullerton, SJSU President, and Dr. Arlene Okerlund, Academic Vice-President, we learned that of the 20 CSU campuses, SJSU was ranked second to last (19th) in their hiring of Chicano/Latino professors. This was especially the case since Dr. Fullerton's tenure as President of SJSU. We were blown away by that fact! Who was last? I believe it was Humboldt State University. We barely surpassed Humboldt State!! Who was First? Bakersfield State University, which has a Chicano President, Dr. Tomas Arciniega.

We asked ourselves: In San Jose, with it's impressive activists tradition, how and why had we let that happen? We were angry at the university (SJSU), but we were especially angry at ourselves. And I must admit, we were also angry at our brothers and sisters employed at SJSU for their impotence and inertia. However, we came to understand their dilemma---they had tried, but they were limited in what they could do.

Consequently, there was a need to leverage the community to assume action, and it did. At our very first meeting with Dr. Fullerton and Dr. Okerlund, they conveyed to us the same old tired justification for the university's dismal record in hiring Chicanos/Latinos: Chicano/Latino Ph.D's weren't available. They even presented to us statistical information about the availability of Hispanics with doctorates nationally---the availability was low, and it appeared impossible to significantly increase Chicano/Latino hires at the rate that we wanted them.

They had a point. Our numbers were statistically low. But we sure and hell didn't deserve to be 19th in the state!!! And so we

throughout this process we had our detractors, and some of them were our very own people. Certain Hispanic staff within SJSU pointed out that we were pushing too hard; that our aggressiveness was making it uncomfortable for them within the university, especially with other minority groups. We were even told that people on campus feared that their administration was "turning over the university to the Mexicans."

We were not dissuaded. We continued with our meetings--and the meetings continue to this day. Most recently, with the revival of the Mexican American Graduate Studies Department.

Again, to their credit, both Dr. Fullerton and Dr. Okerlund persisted with us, worked with us, and responded--at times courageously before their own colleagues--by holding others accountable for diversifying their departments with Chicanos/Latinos. We developed mutual respect for one another throughout our working relationship. In the end, we even came to enjoy the chocolate chip cookies and other refreshments they served before each meetings!

That doesn't mean that we can now be complacent. NO---that's what got us into this mess in the first place! When they (Drs. Fullerton and Okerlund) presented us, after two years, with new hiring statistics showing that SJSU was now ranked number 6 in the state, we congratulated them and the university. But then we said: OK, now we want to be NUMBER 1. We want to beat Bakersfield State University in the hiring of Chicano/Latino professors and administrators. And we're going to surely try, but we need more people to get involved and concern themselves with this issue.

To the Graduates and Future Commencements

As for the graduates, we strongly encourage you to pursue your M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s. Don't let them use the worn out rationale: "We can't find qualified Chicanos or Latinos." It's not that they're not there, it's that these institutions aren't looking!

And it doesn't mean that everyone we eventually get hired will care less about the sacrifices of the Chicano community. Some

will not even acknowledge or accept the role of the community in forcing the university to respond to its equity goals by hiring more Raza. This kind of pedanticism and/or naiveness is nothing new. When the San Jose GI Forum graciously invited all newly hired Hispanic professors to a special meeting, to welcome them and introduce them to our community leadership, only a small handful of them showed up. But that's OK---you see, at least four (4) of them did show up, and its there where our community will build. Four is all we need. After all, it only took four to start the Chicano Commencement.

To those of you in the hall today who plan to graduate next year, I encourage you to work with your student cohorts to continue this tradition of the Chicano Commencement. It is our legacy as students and as a community. And when you achieve professional status, I urge you to support this program.

Let me take it one step further; I recommend to the future organizers of this event to keep it as a "Chicano" Commencement, and not to tamper with that term or concept. To do so would be a revision of history--your history and this community's history. You will face opposition, but your opposition will never match the opposition the first organizers experienced twenty years ago. The organizers then were called "communists," "separatists", and even "hoodlums" for organizing a Chicano Commencement.

In the mid-1970's the term "Hispanic" became in vogue and there was pressure to remove the name of "Chicano" from the commencement title. But the organizers of those commencements held their ground, and similar opposition was faced in the 1980's, and I'm sure in this (1991) ccommencement as well. The rationale given is that by removing the name "Chicano" it would serve to maximize greater participation. But I assure you, size of participation is not what matters. It is the integrity--the historical integrity--of the event which is paramount.

Two weeks before our first formal commencement (June 1971), having served as the Chair of the Chicano Commencement Committee, I confronted our keynote speaker, Dr. Jose Carrasco, expressing serious doubts about whether we could pull it off. I said, "Jose, there is just too much opposition. We're taking some hard shots for doing this. I don't know whether we're going to get that many people to come. So I don't want us to waste your time."

He said to me, and I'll never forget it: "Mauro, if it's just you and I, all by ourselves, standing in the middle of the Hall that day, we're still going to have a Chicano Commencement."

On June 5, 1971 we had twenty-five (25) graduates and over two hundred people in the audience. And today, look at your participation. It's impressive! Even your critics are here!!

symbol of Chicano struggle for convenience sake, or to merely satisfy or placate your critics. Thank God for the critics. If you don't have critics then you're not doing anything provocative. Show me someone or some group without critics and I'll show you somebody without a legacy. And few events are as provocative as a Chicano Commencement.

Again, I want to extend my congratulations and gratitude to the organizers of the 21st Chicano Commencement--and on behalf of all of those who organized this event in the past.

And finally to the graduates, the reason for the season: We all take pride in your achievements. I wonder how many people realize what you had to go through to get here. I can only liken your journey to the loneliness of the long distance runner. Whether you've gotten here 1st, 2nd, 50th, or last, it matters not. What matters is that you've finished. And by finishing, you've set the pace for the rest of us.

You are the best that our community has to offer. You have to be. And the fact that you've chosen to participate in this Chicano Commencement makes your achievement even more special.

Felicitades to each and everyone of you. Thank you.
