

CRES Solidarity Statement with COLA Campaign

The faculty in the Program in Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) at UC Santa Cruz expresses our solidarity with graduate students who are calling for financial resources to meet the rapidly rising costs of living in and around Santa Cruz. CRES, like so many other ethnic studies programs, owes much of its existence to a living tradition of civil disobedience. With student movement as its center of gravity, that tradition has been fueled by the kind of intellectual creativity that the devastatingly high cost of living in Santa Cruz makes difficult to sustain. Accordingly, we regard the COLA campaign as part of a long and vibrant history of grassroots campus activism to advance economic and social justice at the university. The campaign seeks to confront and contest the socioeconomic conditions that make life unsustainable for so much of the majority-minority student population on this campus. In so doing, the COLA campaign represents a major effort to establish the conditions in which ethnic studies can live and thrive. As scholars of ethnic studies, we know well that the history of strikes like these is a history of the struggle to democratize public universities.

Graduate students continue to play a key role in that democratizing work. To join with them in their fight for equitable living and working conditions is to reckon with the conditions that shape the great majority of academic workers today. Knowledge, it would seem, is an incidental product of today's graduate education: its primary products are low-wage workers and debtors. At UC Santa Cruz, student debt has fueled the past decade's skyrocketing real estate inflation. Not only do students routinely lose the majority of their paychecks to rent, but also, they cannot afford the basics--groceries, utilities, and other living expenses--without accumulating debt and/or taking on outside jobs. Their struggle to make ends meet, moreover, eclipses what should theoretically be their primary purpose: their training, research, and studies.

In other words, the demand for a COLA is a demand for the very conditions that would make an education worthy of the name possible. Though it would offer a meaningful ballast for all students, its impact would be particularly profound for first-generation students; low-income students; students of color; undocumented students; queer and trans students; and/or students without familial financial support. Many of these students make up our graduate Designated Emphasis (DE) students and undergraduate majors in CRES. When these students regularly face eviction, heavy rent burden, and food insecurity, it radically impacts our ability to serve a diverse student population. Conditions in which students struggle so much to live are not conditions in which education can flourish. All students at UC Santa Cruz need to be able to afford to live where they work and learn.

With UC Santa Cruz in the national spotlight, it troubles us greatly that the upper administration has decided to take a retaliatory approach to graduate students for fighting for a more livable wage rather than to lead with vision. As a program, CRES opposes retaliation against striking graduate students—including the expectation that undergraduates report their TAs—and expresses solidarity with all workers and others facing structural racism and class exploitation. We thus call upon the university to enter into good-faith negotiations with the strikers rather than to replicate toxic structures and practices of policing, surveillance, and punishment. On this point we side with what we regard as the principle that animates the COLA strike: higher education deserves far better conditions of work and life than are available to UC Santa Cruz's students at present.

As the fastest-growing major in the humanities and a socially transformative area of study that galvanizes students across campus to envision and enact structural change, we want to emphasize that solidarity with the COLA struggle is in keeping with the pedagogical commitments of ethnic studies within the university landscape. Without question, graduate student labor is essential to the CRES mission of delivering a high-quality undergraduate curriculum. Yet equally crucial to our students' education is critical reflection on systems of power and inequity. In their support of their TAs and GSIs, our majors recognize this. In the immiseration of their TAs and GSIs, our majors see not only their own precarity reflected back at them but also the neoliberalization of higher education. In addition to writing "Give them COLA" on their final papers last quarter, 1,400 undergraduate students have signed a [petition](#) in solidarity with the graduate student strikers refuting the claim that they are harmed by the strike. Ultimately, it is our obligation as teachers to stand alongside our striking graduate students and the undergraduate students they teach, and collectively realize the conditions that allow their education to flourish.