

How Black Students Are Saving Higher Education



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What a time to be alive.

In the wake of the one-year anniversary of the non-indictment of Michael Brown's assailant, Darren Wilson, and the murder of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, we are witnessing an uprising from Black people across this country that is only parallel to the civil rights movement. The energy from these national uprisings, the righteous rage, frustration, love, and sense of urgency has undergirded a new movement for Black lives and racial justice. With Black women, queer and trans folks, and Black people at various intersections that do not fit "traditional" narratives of leadership and social change, Black folks have risen up to demand social transformation. Many of these protestors, the ones who were in the streets of Ferguson, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Oakland, Atlanta, New Jersey, and all across this nation, are college students, and we have taken the movement to our campuses.

As much as state sanctioned violence effects us out of schools, state divestment in higher education, the neoliberalization of the university, and the assault on Black

lives follows us back from our marches with the community to our campuses. The way that Black Studies departments and Black cultural centers see consistent cuts to their funding; the way that universities exploit the labor of graduate students and adjunct faculty; the daily microaggressions that cut a little deeper each day; and the recent threats on our very lives for fighting for what we believe in, have all forced us to act. We are tired of the being relegated to second class citizens everywhere we go. We are tired of losing what little resources we have. We are tired of being the last hired and the first fired.

And this is why we are calling for a transformation of higher education.

In spite of the media sensationalism that fixates on building name changes and the resignations of executive administration members, Black students all across the country are calling for systemic changes that are far more than just symbolic. For example, Black students from Concerned Student 1950, the student group at Mizzou that sparked the new Black student movement,

are calling for Black faculty to be at least 10% of the entire campus. Students at California State University, Los Angeles have called for the creation of ten tenure-track positions in their Pan African Studies department, and an additional \$20,000 for Black Student Union programming. Students from AUCShutItDown, an Atlanta based group that runs out of the historically Black Atlanta University Center, is addressing homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and they are pushing back against efforts to gentrify the local area. A student of color collective at Brown University won a \$100-million-dollar initiative to address racial injustice on their campus. Here at Berkeley, we have called for many things, including a Black student resource center where we can organize, study, and exist in a racially affirming space.

While conservative forces paint us as unruly, entitled, and even violent, what we are doing is actually saving higher education. By calling for an investment in faculty, we are combatting the privatization of the university and the neoliberal forces that exploit labor, devalue teaching, and turn social justice into a commodity as opposed to a lifestyle. The Black Liberation Collective, the Black student-led organization that helped to coordinate the national day of action, has called for universities to completely divest from the private prison system, and to invest in the communities that surround them. Of the 70 colleges who have issued demands, at least 40 of them have called for some sort of cultural competency or diversity training in order to address the hostile racial climate on college campuses. Students have called for support systems for civic engagement work, for psychological services tailored to Black experiences, and

for universities to fulfill their missions to be servants of the public good. We are doing more than just talking about the problems; we are actively working to transform them. Currently, Black youth and Black students are viewed as mere recipients of social forces, through a deficit lens of disparities and gloom, and through a cultural matrix that seeks to explain our plight, not transform it. At this moment, we are in the wake of a political transformation. Black young people, both inside and outside the university, are the current vanguards of one of the most important social movements of our time. We are strong. We are worthy of what we are asking for. We embody the radical, democratic visions of Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King Jr., and others who sought to transform American society. We are doing so much more than just trying to make these campuses more accommodating to us – we are saving higher education.

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Image by Paul Silva