

San Diego State University Wants to Become a Research Institution: What About Teaching and Learning?

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For more than a decade, a quiet transition has occurred at San Diego State University. Unlike the isolated UC San Diego campus in La Jolla, SDSU is perceived by our local Chicano/Latino community as a public institution critical to the development of leadership and change agents to surmount the systemic racism that hinders our socioeconomic mobility. SDSU is part of the California State University system, and as an August 27 SD Union-Tribune article emphasizes, "Teaching was, and still is, the primary mission of California State University campuses."

Despite this responsibility, the U-T article details that SDSU seeks to acquire recognition as a Research I institution. Becoming a research institution might have positive results. The move would enable SDSU to grant its own doctoral degrees. We certainly need more Chicano/Latino students with a Ph.D. to alleviate the shortage of Chicano/Latino faculty in all colleges and universities in San Diego County. However, the critical question is: can SDSU become a Research I institution without decreasing the quality of teaching and learning at its campuses, and if so, how?

The U-T article describes the research of an SDSU biologist, who blatantly admits that "much of the (SDSU) faculty" are no longer content to do "basic" research to improve the human condition. Instead, they pursue research that will lead to inventions that can be patented and launch a private business. Of course, this is the process enacted by Irwin Jacobs, a former engineering professor at UCSD that turned his research into Qualcomm and became a millionaire. The notion of providing tax dollars to a public institution for professors to develop their own business seems spurious at best.

If so many SDSU professors are concentrating on developing a lucrative, private business, how will they also concentrate on teaching and mentoring students? How will our Chicano/Latino students learn the knowledge and sensibilities necessary to become positive agents of social justice and anti-racism, referred to by the Chicana scholar Gina A. Garcia as "liberatory outcomes," if their professors are focused on developing a commodity for their personal benefit?

We need only look at UC San Diego, a Research I institution since its founding. I taught and worked at UCSD for twenty-eight years and witnessed their neglect of teaching and learning. There, the incentive structure for faculty tenure and promotion rests solely on research, and much of that is aimed at inventing commodities that can be sold on the open market. That incentive structure creates a barrier for faculty that might wish to provide excellent teaching, mentoring, and service to the university. A hierarchy is established among academic departments. Disciplines such as Chicana & Chicano Studies are perceived as second-class because their research doesn't lead to commodities like STEM disciplines. Class size becomes larger, and more classes are taught by graduate students and temporary faculty, with students' access to faculty diminished.

All students suffer from such circumstances, but particularly Chicano/Latino students. Our SD Concilio, a coalition of local alumni, faculty, and staff in existence for over thirty years, advocates for more Chicano/Latino faculty at institutions such as SDSU, but an increased emphasis on research is likely to privilege the hiring of white faculty produced by high-powered research institutions. As scholars such as Garcia have pointed out, research institutions are often impersonal spaces that value products rather than relationships, a stark conflict with the cultural values of Chicanos/Latinos.

The U-T article points out other implications of SDSU's transition to a Research I institution. Their new Mission Valley campus was promised as a space to increase students' learning, and our local Chicanos/Latinos anticipated spaces where we can gather to construct strategies to empower our community. Instead, the Mission Valley campus will mainly be a business incubator, supporting a largely white corporate community that has historically contributed to systemic racism against Chicanos/Latinos.

Incredibly, the article also details that SDSU will build a "STEM research and education center" in Brawley, near SDSU's Imperial Valley campus. The objective is described as training Imperial Valley students to extract lithium from the ground for batteries in electric vehicles. How will our students become socially conscious leaders for our community by extracting lithium?

Our SD Concilio is not naïve, and we know that there is very little we can do to stop this train from leaving the station. We also acknowledge the positive steps that SDSU has taken to support Chicano/Latino students. However, we would very much like to see SDSU's leadership identify the strategies it will pursue to ensure that teaching and learning are not diminished. We also invite our elected officials to join us to ensure accountability.