



As she stepped off the Blue Line train last fall at the LA Convention Center, just two stops from Trade Tech College where she was a student, Chriscyntia Calhoun felt a pang of anxiety in the pit of her stomach. She had never before addressed union leaders, and she knew there was a lot at stake. What's more, as an AFT student intern, she had mobilized 150 fellow Trade Tech students to attend the LA County Federation of Labor's Delegates Convention on Sept. 30, 2004 as part of an even larger force for change. Her hope: that these community college students would showcase their political potential, that together with labor they could protect and improve their education - and their lives.

MOTIVATING STUDENT POWER FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By John R. McDowell, Political Director
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That day at the Convention Center, LA County Federation delegates were considering an initiative campaign. If adopted by the delegates and passed by voters, the measure would establish a new fund to provide every community college student in Los Angeles with \$1,000 a year for textbooks and tools.

Miguel Contreras, the visionary executive secretary-treasurer of the Labor Federation, believed that labor, by offering students this help up, could make a powerful first impression. After addressing these eager student activists at earlier campaign events, Contreras recognized he was looking at the leaders of the next generation, and he wanted to be sure they knew labor was there to help them when they needed it most. He invited the students to help personalize this dream.

Student and faculty organizers from the nine Los Angeles colleges worked hard to mobilize students and prepare for this day. Hundreds of students from these very colleges came to the Convention Center, from nearby Trade Tech College and from LA Mission College, some 30 miles away.

When the lights dimmed, a dramatic video highlighting student political actions, like the 12,000 student/faculty March in Sacramento in 2003 and 5,000 at a 2004 Pershing Square rally, electrified the crowd, demonstrating the power of students mobilizing for a cause they believed in – access to higher education.

As the lights came up, the dramatic tension heightened as 375 community college students streamed into the hall, chanting and waving signs. As they packed the stage and the entire front of the hall, the energy level at the meeting went through the roof.

Chrisynthia spoke confidently as she stood before the union leaders and graphically described how tough it was for a single mom to raise a family and put herself through college. She and four other AFT student interns spoke from the heart about the challenges for working students to pay the \$800 a year in fees, and \$1,000 to \$1,500 in books and tools. “It takes most of us five or six years just to earn an A.A. degree,” she explained, “because we can’t afford fees and books for more than a course or two each semester.”

When Contreras, who died tragically last May, asked the labor delegates who among them had ever attended a community college, nearly 80 percent of the delegates raised their hands. It was clear that any effort to improve student access, whether it be holding the line on fees, helping with books and tools, or insisting on Prop 98 funding guarantees, would help all working families, as well as the energetic and committed students in the hall that day.

For Chrisynthia and so many others, a Textbook and Tool Fund would be a dream come true. For many, this hand up could pull them out of a life of poverty.

The unionists clearly understood how fee hikes, budget cuts and soaring book costs had slammed the doors of the community colleges to thousands of students, and they wanted their labor movement to do something to reverse the decline. Every single one of the 950 labor leaders voted to wage a campaign for a Textbook and Tool Fund.

Today, with the stakes even higher and the possibilities even greater, the Guild is continuing to grow its student mobilization campaign. The Guild is sponsoring training sessions and college credit classes to teach students the skills to make them effective leaders.

This fall, students will take on the November special election, staffing tables in the campus free-speech areas, collecting personal e-mails for the Guild’s e-mail alert program, and organizing rallies, town hall meetings and Get Out The Vote (GOTV) work. Students will make brief classroom visits to educate students about the impact of fee hikes and budget cuts, and to register new voters.

“When we go into the classrooms and give presentations on the importance of voting and getting engaged in the political process,” said Suairis Hernandez, an intern from East Los Angeles Community College, “we educate the students about the impact of public policy on their lives. We help them connect the dots.”

Student Mobilization Timeline at a Glance

- **2003/2004 – Guild launches its Student Mobilization campaign**
 - o sends over 65,000 student post cards to legislators and the governor
 - o organizes hundreds of short student visits to classrooms to educate students about fee hikes and budget cuts
 - o registers 1653 new voters
 - o student delegations visited almost every L. A. area legislator
 - o hundreds of LACCD students joined 12,000 students in Sacramento for the largest rally in the Capitol in years, demanding no more fee hikes
- **2004/2005 – Second year of program**
 - o grows to 50 interns volunteering on a regular basis
 - o approx. 100 volunteers visit 625 classes
 - o registers over 6,000 new voters
 - o recruits 2,000 student poll workers
 - o many join an anti-WalMart campaign in Rosemead
 - o march with farm workers, building security, hotel and restaurant workers at various rallies
 - o over 150 students participate in the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Conference in Los Angeles in Spring 2005

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*– Suairis Hernandez, Intern
East Los Angeles Community College*



After November, the students will apply the skills they've developed and focus on qualifying the Textbook and Tool Fund for the November 2006 election. Rather than view this as a series of elections, students learn that the political process is ongoing and they need to be involved continuously.

When she stood before the labor Congress, Chrisynthia understood, then, how high the stakes were for her and her friends, relatives and neighbors. She spoke – not just for herself, but for her family and her community.

She and her fellow students learned firsthand to never underestimate the power of people united and fighting for justice

and equality. Students may come into the mobilization campaign doubting their potential power and ability to make change. But having participated in the mobilization campaign, students – like Miguel and the delegates at the Convention – will never again doubt their potential, nor their ability to make a difference for themselves and for working families.

As Suairis Hernandez summarized, “Students must be engaged in the fight for community colleges if they are to succeed and be as powerful as they can be. Students have the power to change the world. All we need is the strength, the commitment, and the organization to make it happen.” ■

How Faculty Can Help Build Student Power

- Invite students to visit your classes to discuss issues
- Give extra credit for political action and mobilization
- Support student-led events like Town Hall mtgs, rallies, etc.
- Discuss in class and assign homework on current events
- Challenge students to get involved and to organize
- Urge ASO, student clubs, and students to get active
- Provide and help train student activists and volunteers
- Conduct voter registration in classes (fully legal to do)
- Help students arrange visits to local legislative offices
- Identify and pay student interns, leaders, and volunteers

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