

# TELLING THE TRUTH about Hostile Climate & the Need to Increase Underrepresented Minority Students at Cal

★ Report & Excerpts from the November 10<sup>th</sup> Public Hearing ★

**T**HE NOVEMBER 10, 2005 PUBLIC HEARING to Investigate Hostile Climate for Underrepresented Minority Students was historic. Latina/o, black, and Asian American students gave courageous, gripping testimonies of their experiences with the racism and discrimination at UC-Berkeley that has been made worse with the drop in underrepresented minority student enrollment since the end of affirmative action. Minority students made clear that we will NOT be driven out of UC-Berkeley and we will NOT accept second-class, back-of-the-bus treatment. Students also made clear that the resegregation of UC-Berkeley has created a more atomized, less meaningful, and less satisfying experience for ALL students at Cal. The hundreds of students present expressed their solidarity and passed resolutions declaring our movement's determination to combat hostile climate and increase underrepresented minority student enrollment.

The transcript of the hearing will be presented to the UC-Berkeley administration shortly, and BAMN is launching a symposium series this spring that will investigate further the effect that the drop in underrepresented minority student enrollment has had on hostile campus climate. Chancellor Robert Birgeneau, who has condemned the drop in underrepresented minority student enrollment and said "I feel a moral obligation to address the issue of inclusion head-on. Ultimately it is a fight for the soul of this institution," has not committed yet to any action that would address this hostile climate. It is clear what must be done to combat hostile climate: this year, the UC-Berkeley administration must admit an entering class that has a REAL INCREASE in the numbers of underrepresented minority students. The struggle to expose the truth of racism at UC-Berkeley that began with the Public Hearing means that Birgeneau must now contend with more and more students speaking out about hostile climate and not accepting it ANY LONGER.

READ THE FULL TRANSCRIPT AND SUBMIT YOUR OWN TESTIMONY AT:

**UCHOSTILECLIMATE.BLOGSPOT.COM**

## Martha Hernandez

Sophomore stands in defense of Latina/o students at Cal

The first semester here at Cal, my best friend and I were taking a College Writing course. One day she went to her class and asked her teacher for help. The teacher told her that she would not pass her class because she was too proud of being Mexican, and too proud of speaking Spanish.

We didn't let this fly. We tried to go talk to the Administration, we tried talking to Vice Chancellor Padilla. And guess what they did? I know what you're guessing. Absolutely nothing.

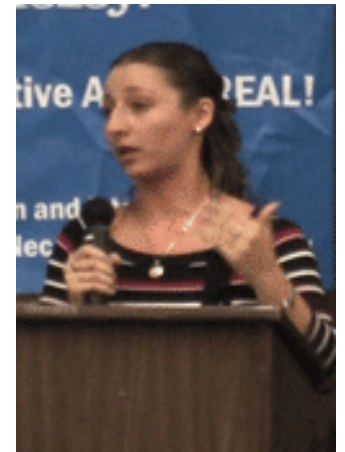
We let the semester go by and see what would happen. Sure enough, she failed her course...

I ask you: Was it because she was stupid? How would you feel in one of your classes where somebody told you, "You're not smart enough for being here?" How are you going to feel in your next course? Are you going to feel like you should stay here and stand strong? ...

I constantly get reminded of my race every day. When I walk through campus, people look at me, and they say, "What are you?" Not "Who are you?", but "What are you?", like I'm some sort of specimen, an experiment. "What are you? You talk weird but you look white. What's wrong with you?"

And I proudly say "I'm Mexican," and their first response is, "How did you get in?" And then they come to a fabulous conclusion. This is smart, right? Strategic. "Oh, I get it. Your last name is 'Hernandez.' It was on the application. That's why you got in."

*Continued p. 3*



*BAMN Meetings every Monday, 7:00 PM  
at 155 Barrows Hall, UC-Berkeley*

# Dimitri García

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Senior speaks out about being forced to change his major and leave the History Department

## MARTHA HERNANDEZ, cont.

They have pity for you. I don't think so. I busted my ass off through all of my years in school, until I got here. Just to give you a little background, neither of my parents finished elementary school. I'm first-born, raised in the US, and I'm the only person in my family to have finished elementary school, middle school, high school, and to have gotten to such a prestigious University. You tell me: Do I deserve to be here? I think so. And I don't believe that anyone has to question that authority...

I've had several instances when I started a conversation with a person, or they started talking to me, and they assumed that I'm white. And we have a conversation, and throughout the conversation it just comes up, I start talking about my family, where I come from, and they say, "Oh, you're not white?" And I say, "No, I'm Mexican."

And they completely change the conversation on me. Their tone of voice changes, their context changes, they start talking about completely different things and avoid the situation. They don't want to talk to me anymore because I'm not worthy enough, because I don't have what they consider to be the white privilege. So they shouldn't talk to me anymore...

So let me tell you what this very, very smart person responded to me when I said — how do I respond to the question of why am I — how did I get in, and not the other people. And he said, "Martha, the question isn't why are you here. The question is, why aren't there more of you here." Which is exactly the question we're addressing today. We need more underrepresented minorities on this campus and we need them now. We're not asking for a favor, we're demanding this.

"Like a steam locomotive, I knew I was on the right track. I believed I was on the right track." That's how I opened my personal statement to Cal. I took that train right into the History Department and I brought that train to a screeching halt. Why?

I transferred here from a junior college in San Diego. The population of Latino students at that school is well over 90%. Only 13% transferred to a four-year university. I believed I was taking that right track coming here to study history, to solve problems, to address problems, to make my voice heard, to challenge my fellow students, to be challenged in turn.

Yet, when I would raise my hand, when hot topics would be raised in class, topics of race, topics of immigration, I wasn't called on. They would call other people, and I would say, "Well, at least someone is being heard." I didn't make a fuss about it, I didn't want to be labeled a problem student; I didn't want to approach the teacher and say, "Look, why aren't you calling me?"

No, because I was learning; I was paying attention; I was taking notes; I was reading the material. Yet I knew why I wasn't called on when it came time for the exam.

The first question was, "Explain the significance of the 1790 law." Only free white persons can become citizens. This is a history class, an American Cultures class. I responded the significance is in the seeds of racism where this law was being predicated upon the opposition to black; the opposition to indigenous; where the possibility to become a citizen was open to whites. This is in 1790. This is history. This is a fact.

My grade came back: F. Why? At this point I quit asking myself why. These were the doubts that would be summoned in me. I, too, came in with a high GPA. I was qualified to be here. I was accepted into this University based on my qualifications, based on my taking courses in history. And yet, here I was getting an F.

I had to defend my paper. I went to the GSI, the grad student who read my paper, and I put my case before him. What he told me was that I focused on the wrong issue. "It wasn't about race," he said, "this was about indentured servitude" and how, if you came and you were not free, and you were indentured, you could not become a citizen.

I made my case, I cited sources, and he just laughed and said "This is my area of expertise. This is the one topic in history I know most about. And if you take it to the professor, he'll say the same thing."

I brought that train to a screeching halt. I dropped that class because I knew I would keep going to class and keep feeling like, "Am I the only one who wants to challenge this?" What else are they going to say? Why am I going to subject myself to this version of history?

Folks, I changed my entire major. I didn't want to be in that environment... I switched my major to Ethnic Studies, studying essentially the same thing: history. But this is where I felt I could raise the questions. I could challenge my fellow students. I could be in that environment where I could get my voice out, where I could bring my voice to be heard by my fellow students.

I'm not going to be derailed, I'm not going to allow my peers, my fellow students, to be derailed. That's why I'm here tonight. That's why we're all here tonight. We will not be derailed.



# Ron Williams

Representative of the Black Graduate Student Association describes difficulties for black graduate students



Many African American graduate students report that what contributes to their feelings of isolation and hostility on this campus parallel the experience of one student, who noted instances where 1) he was the only African American student in the department; 2) he was the only African American student in all of his classes, including grad seminars and a 100-student undergraduate lecture; 3) when trying to get students to help in his department, to help reach out to people of color in recruiting, received responses such as, “We have to be careful not to lower standards,” and, “We want to be careful about getting people’s hopes up.” 4) The faculty discussed at length whether a particular African American candidate was capable of handling our curriculum, based on GRE scores, while having no such discussion concerning white students, even when arguing for admitting one with lower scores than the African American applicant. 5) The department was trying to address racial diversity by bringing on white students to discuss issues of race.

# May Yang & Sue Vang

Members of Laotian American Student Representatives see anti-Asian racism

**May Yang:** Our numbers and our experiences are so different from the typical model minority, which is a terrible stereotype as it is. We don’t come from over-educated backgrounds. We came from refugees of the Vietnam War that brought us here, poor and uneducated. Those are the backgrounds that brought us here.

And also, our numbers on campus are so low and our ethnicities are not recognized on this campus. If you look at the statistics, the breakdown of Asian groups on campus, when you research it, and call around looking for it, we don’t have numbers for Lao, Hmong, and Indian. Those are our ethnic groups. There are other ones as well..

**Sue Vang:** As Laotian Student Representatives, we’re holding an event on the 16th of November, because that’s the week prior to the Big Game. There was some misunderstanding, but we had reserved Upper Sproul for the 16th of November and... I received an e-mail personally, because I made a reservation for Upper Sproul, from an individual from the University of California UC Rally Committee, for the tree chopping event for the Big Game.

But the next day she called me and she asked if we could move. I said that we had been planning this for months. Obviously, the reason we had Upper Sproul reserved is that we—we’re not going to move our event, and that it’s important to us as well as our community here, Southeast Asians in particu-



lar, the Hmong, Tin, and Lao. We’re overlooked, we’re seen as model minorities...

And she said, “Well, why don’t you — wouldn’t it be more beneficial if you moved down to Lower Sproul with AAA [Asian American Association]. And if you were on Upper Sproul, you could do your event on Upper Sproul, you would be competing with them.”

And I’m like, “Competing? How would we be competing?” And so she said — she couldn’t really answer, and so she said, “Well if you guys are the same, you have the same interest groups.” And I’m like, “Not really. We’re different ethnic groups and we have our different purposes, although we do have commonalities.”...

She didn’t say much. But that was our recent experience. And we’re still going to have our event, which is on November 16, a Wednesday. (Applause) So come on. We’ll be out there and we’ll make our statements and let the University and the campus know that Laotian students are here.

# Jocelyn Eastman

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Oakland Technical High School senior speaks out on her one-day visit to UCB as part of an outreach program



[At a UC-Berkeley outreach program I attended] they said, “You’re the cream of the crop. If you apply here, you’ll be the few black students on campus, and you might have to deal with issues A, B, and C. How will you react? You must react in a way that will not look bad for the community.”

I pondered this, and I thought, “Why should I have to represent my entire community? Why can’t I just go to school and focus on getting out of what I’m in right now? Why can’t I just go to school and not have to worry how everyone is going to look at me, and how everyone is going

to think? ‘This girl represents the entire black race, and she looks really stupid.’”...

The first thing I noticed upon walking into Crossroads [Dining Commons] was the segregation. Students that were black, the few students that were in there, sat together at one table. And then white students sat together at other tables. And Asian American students sat together.

On first instinct, one would think, “Okay, they’re sitting with their friends. But why does everyone’s friends look like them?” It’s kind of disturbing...

I made an effort, me and my sister. We were the only two. We knew each other, and nobody else at school. But when we had our lunches on the first day, we were going to the table with white students, walking towards the table, and we get “the look.”

Everybody knows what “the look” is. “The look” is, “Where on earth are you coming from? Why are you sitting at our table? What are you?” It’s sick. It’s like you feel like you’re an alien from another planet. You feel like you’re from France, or something, like you don’t speak English, like you’re not a human being.

And you walk away. You walk away feeling rejected, like you don’t belong, and it hurts. And I thought since I was going to UC Berkeley, the top institution in the world, the number one public university, that it would be different. But it’s not. And it’s sick...

So there is definitely a hostile environment on this campus. And if someone like me, who doesn’t even go here can feel it, then there must be something going on, something that needs to be changed. And that is not right.

# Derwyn Johnson

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Berkeley High School sophomore compares UC-Berkeley and the schools he has attended



I had the privilege of going to the three main types of schooling in California: majority white, majority black, and now, integrated. And majority white and very black, everybody knows the differences between those two. Poor funding; no books at all; poor classrooms; people had to sit on the floor; and all that other stuff.

At the majority-white school, you still could like feel a hostile climate. And at a young age, I already feel I’m not called on, and I could feel the experiences that the people testifying before me at such a young age.

But now I have the privilege of going to Berkeley High School, which is a very integrated school, flat out. Everybody is proportionate there, and integration really does make a big difference.

My experiences at Berkeley High for the past few months has been one of the best experiences of my life. You get to experience like a whole bunch of, I don’t know, just diversity and all these different cultures and classroom discussions. And everybody gets called on and everybody is speaking out. Really have an intellectual discussion at a high school level.

That’s not really portrayed at this college campus. Walking around on this campus, it’s kind of sad that you can go one day and count the number of black and Latino students, in one day, and the number doesn’t change. You can do it again and again, and keep coming up with the same low number.

And during presentation in classrooms, all the classrooms look the same. The racial background of the classrooms, in a random classroom that you go to, is the same. Which doesn’t reflect the Bay Area or California as a whole.

Being a high school student, you look at different colleges you want to go to. And Berkeley is one of the top colleges that keeps coming up from parents, students, teachers, and friends. But being on this campus, and getting “the look” and everything, I ask myself if I want to put myself in this position. Do I want to put myself in this hostile climate? I ask myself, “Am I what they’re looking for?”

But that shouldn’t be the question. This is what I’m looking for. And this campus needs more students like me who will stand up and fight for their numbers.

**Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration, and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN)**

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