

Resisting the Corporatization and Militarization of University Education

Students for a Democratic Society at the University of British Columbia

By [Jasmine R. Rezaee](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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To effectively resist the commercialization of public space and the corporatization and militarization of education, students at the University of British Columbia (UBC) created a political group in the summer of 2007 called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). SDS-UBC consists of students who are unafraid to use direct-action to enact radical social change. We actively resist the corporate and military funding of our education, and we believe that students should have a meaningful role in the decision-making processes at the university.

From March 3-7, 2008 SDS hosted a “Resisting the University” conference. Our conference contained sixteen different events ranging from panels and speakers to protests and TrekPark 2.0 building sessions (a campaign to reclaim park space on the campus). Our keynote guest speakers were professors David Noble from York University in Toronto and Denis Rancourt from the University of Ottawa. We had panels about the corporatization of the university, grad student apathy, militarization of education, academic freedom, critical pedagogy, the gentrification of our campus/city, the history of activism at UBC and Vancouver, and discussions about the governance structures at UBC.

A highlight of the week of activity included an opening speech by David Noble. He proclaimed a radical epistemology of knowledge through action and insisted that students must fight the university from outside its bureaucratic structure. Noble lambasted the tenureship process, the complacency of faculty, the corporatization of education, and the power-dynamics that structure the classroom and student-teacher relations. He proclaimed that the future is not pre-determined and that it is up to students, activists, and young people more generally to create a better university and society.

Another important event that occurred was our protest held on the day of UBC’s 100 year anniversary. A large SDS and sympathizers contingent marched through the Student Union Building, Brock Hall (UBC’s financial hub), and occupied the Old Administration building. We barged into a UBC executive meeting and seriously frightened a group of predominantly white males in business suits. We ate their food (a fancy buffet), screamed at them through a megaphone and put the unelected, Liberal government-appointed Board of Governors member Stephen Owen under severe heat! We also went to the president’s office and chanted “1,2,3,4 we’re knocking on your office door” but he never came out (the coward!).

After occupying the Old Administration Building, we went to our campus library and protested the presence of a huge, newly-erected military mural. Finally, we barged into a

construction site and halted work for a while.

Our Week of Resistance was an important consciousness-raising experience. A reoccurring theme throughout the conference was the responsibility for social change that we carry as students and members of society.

Another theme that emerged in our conference was the hegemonic fear that renders faculty politically impotent.

A milieu of fear and intimidation has been bred due to

- a) the rise of sessional teachers, who constitute a flexible, underpaid university proletariat;
- b) the increasing difficulty in obtaining tenure; and
- c) the tenure process, which is designed to ensure the complacency and capitulation of faculty.

The fear of being fired or denied tenure often prevents faculty from including more critical perspectives in the classroom and discussing issues that may be deemed “controversial” by the university establishment. This curtails academic freedom and seriously hampers the development of critical thinking skills within the student body.

Each panel and discussion at our conference reminded us that there are many issues which are not discussed in the classroom but that directly shape the content and availability of courses. For example, because neoliberal or capitalist/profit-driven forces are engulfing the university, departments that don’t exist to generate a profit, like women and gender’s studies, or arts courses more generally, obtain increasingly diminished funding, limiting the availability of courses and the quality of research from these departments.

Some concrete issues that came out of Resisting the University which SDS-UBC hopes to realize:

- Banning military recruitment at UBC.
- Banning military funding for the Arts and Sciences (eg from the Security and Defence Forum of the Canadian military).
- Stopping the rise of sessional teachers by changing the university’s hiring policies.
- Changing the tenure process so that it breeds less fear, conservatism and complacency.
- Stopping commercial development on campus: affordable student, staff and faculty housing only!
- Equalizing the allocation of funds so that departments that don’t exist to generate a profit secure adequate funding for quality research and permanent

staff.

- Pressuring the provincial government to better fund post-secondary education.
- No more Tuition Fees! Zero student debt and zero fees to ensure the university is accessible to all.
- Transforming UBC's governance structures into more transparent, representative and accountable bodies by empowering the Senate; jettisoning appointed seats; allowing students to easily place an item on the Board of Governors agenda; and eliminating corporate presence on the Board.
- An official acknowledgement that UBC is built on stolen land and that the Coast Salish, and the Musqueam people in particular, have a right to it.
- Coalition building among sessionals, faculty, and other activists organizations to realize these goals.

The university should not be a vocational school. It should not be a place where people obtain a few skills to qualify them for a specific occupation in the capitalist economy. The university should be a revolutionary place where students learn the language of critique and dissent and develop critical thinking skills that will enable them to engage with other members of society in a socially and politically relevant manner. To realize this aim, SDS will continue to resist and concretely act to achieve each of the above mentioned goals.

Jasmine R. Rezaee is a member of Students for a Democratic Society at UBC. For more information on SDS, go to <http://www.sdsabc.ca/>. While there, check out the SDS monthly newspaper, The Knoll.

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Articles by: [Jasmine R. Rezaee](#)

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