

Reframing the Debate

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WASHINGTON -- Faculty leaders from 21 states on Tuesday formally launched a nationwide effort to fight cuts to their institutions' budgets and to make higher education more widely accessible, and they announced the formation of a think tank to advance those purposes.

[The Campaign for the Future of Higher Education](#), which resulted from a [January meeting](#) of leaders of faculty unions, espouses goals that are, at this point, more conceptual than concrete. The possible exception is the think tank, which was described as a virtual operation (that is, not housed in an actual building) and whose staff either has not been determined or was not divulged. It is designed to produce "actionable" research that would lead to new legislation.

But one larger goal, which organizers say already has been achieved, is fostering communication between faculty members on how to respond to political and economic pressures being felt at campuses across many states. Other goals include placing faculty members in the thick of conversations (from which they have largely been excluded, deliberately or otherwise) about [assessment](#) and budget priorities and, especially, reframing the larger debate about the declining resources available to higher education.

Lillian Taiz, president of the California Faculty Association, which helped to spearhead the campaign, described the larger public conversation and policies surrounding higher education as feeling like a "mounting assault" on the quality of education and on students' opportunities to pursue a college degree.

"This campaign is about changing that dynamic," Taiz, a professor of history at California State University at Los Angeles, said here at the National Press Club. "It is about tearing down the walls of isolation among faculty but, more importantly, it is bringing together faculty and other groups who, like us, are passionate about higher education and deeply distressed at its current direction."

Several of the 11 speakers at Tuesday's event focused on the assumptions underlying - and the consequences of -- cuts in federal and state aid to higher education. This pattern runs counter to that of other advanced economies, which have either maintained or increased spending on public higher education because of its contributions to knowledge creation, innovation, research and the development of a skilled work force, according to [research cited](#) by **Tom Auxter**, a professor of philosophy at the University of Florida and president of United Faculty of Florida. "The only way to grow the economy is to do what other economies are doing, which is to invest in higher education," said Auxter, "not to disinvest in higher education."

(Notably, Great Britain has made deep cuts to higher education, but these occurred after the research Auxter cited.)

For many of the campaign's organizers, such cuts are the direct result of policy decisions -- providing tax breaks for the wealthy, for example -- and not because an ethos of austerity is simply unavoidable. The current situation is the result, they argued, of decades of privatization that has reduced the state's share of many public universities' budgets.

And such cuts have consequences, several speakers pointed out. Often, when cuts are made to public higher education, tuition is increased or offerings are curtailed, or both. Such measures are felt acutely by students and their families, said Barbara Bowen, associate professor of English at Queens College and president of the Professional Staff Congress at the City University of New York.

"We are launching this campaign because we refuse to see genuine college replaced, for all but a tiny minority, with something of lesser value," said Bowen. "Millions of ordinary Americans know that their children's future -- and our future as a society -- depends on equal access to higher education, and we believe they are willing to work for that future. This campaign is in their name."

While faculty unions loomed large on the speakers' podium and among the campaign's organizers, students and other advocacy groups also played a role. Maria Maisto, president of New Faculty Majority, an organization that speaks on behalf of adjuncts, linked faculty working conditions to the learning conditions of students. Many adjuncts have no office space and are not paid to hold office hours, which often makes them less available to students outside of class. "The hierarchies and so-called efficiencies higher education has embraced uncritically are in fact undermining our best efforts to serve our students and our communities," she said.

Arnold Mitchem, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education, which advocates on behalf of first-generation, low-income and disabled college students, blasted federal policy, specifically H.R. 1473, the recently brokered legislative compromise on the 2011 federal budget, for landing hard on TRIO programs, which help prepare low-income students for college. "H.R. 1473 shredded the opportunity infrastructure in this country," he said. "Our policy makers have lost their way."

Students also sounded off. "Year after year the budget has been balanced on our backs," said Victor Sanchez, president of the United States Student Association and a recent graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz. "We are being systematically pushed out, priced out of an institution and a future that was promised to us. All we ask of our decision makers is to have the same chance at an education that they did."

The date of Tuesday's launch coincided with the 57th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The timing underscored recent efforts to link educational opportunity with civil rights and broader issues of justice. Unions, in particular, have sought to highlight the commonalities and shared history between organized labor and the civil rights movement. A series of pro-union teach-ins and rallies took place [last month](#), and was timed to occur on the 43rd anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., who at the time of his murder was in Memphis, Tenn., seeking to organize sanitation workers.

— [Dan Berrett](#)

http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/05/18/faculty_leaders_launch_campaign_for_future_of_higher_education