

Topic: My friend organized and then occupied a college building to protest tuition hikes.

Abstract: In 2008, the recession that America was under began to put pressure on universities, causing their tuition to rise. After nearly doubling in just a couple of years, students decided to take action. My friend organized a group of dedicated students to occupy a school building, effectively shutting both it and the rest of the campus down. Ultimately, law enforcement was called in to break up the protest. The occupation did not go unnoticed, it was heavily reported about in the media and it even spawned similar protests on other college campuses.

Key Words: Recession, Protest, Politics, Occupy, Police Intervention, College, Tuition Rise, San Francisco

I graduated high school and began college in 2008. Since then I saw tuitions rise so high that I was unable to continue my education in a traditional four-year university and am now pursuing my degree in a community college environment. While at college I met a man who I will refer to as JB who organized one of the biggest protests the California State University system would ever see.

In 2008, tuition at San Francisco State University was on the rise. It was up 30% over 2007 and more than 100% over the previous decade. This was the same year that JB began his college education. In order to live in San Francisco and attend SFSU he found himself working nearly 60 hours a week and still struggling to put food on the table. But still he did it; and he was very successful.

Things started getting tougher when it came time to register for the winter semester. There was a tuition hike, another 10% over the previously increased fees. His

money had to be stretched even tighter and the increased pressure began showing in his grades. His GPA was slipping alongside his respect for higher education.

Fall semester of 2009 had two fee increases, a total of another 30%, which started frustrating a lot of students. But JB was far beyond frustrated, he wanted to take action and show that this was not an acceptable way to treat students. He found a handful of likeminded students and they began working on a protest that would effectively show the California State University administration that they could not treat people this way. They met infrequently and communicated mostly through code.

In December of 2009, it was announced that the president of the CSU system was taking a year-end bonus of \$425,000. This infuriated JB to the point of action. He organized his fellows into a protest. On the morning of December 9, they met on the SFSU campus early, dressed in dark clothing with everything they needed to survive for several days. They entered the school's business building and chained all of the doors closed. Thirty students voluntarily entered the building with the intent of having their voices heard by the money-stealing administration.

Because they arrived so early, they had a good amount of time to settle in before students and faculty would start arriving. They began by emptying desks out of classrooms and piling them in front of the doors and windows to fortify their barricades. By the time anyone had arrived, all of the students were on the second floor with nearly a hundred empty desks stacked up the stairs, making their position fairly impenetrable.

At 8:00AM, teachers began arriving to find that they were unable to get to their classrooms. JB and his cohorts saw a group of professors lining up at the main door and knew that their protest was officially underway. It wasn't long before the SFSU administration came out and started analyzing the situation. They promptly sent out an email to all registered students explaining that a group of delinquents were occupying the business building for their own selfish reasons. Students saw through their negative phrasing and recognized the protest for what it was: a critical statement about the questionable morality that plagued the CSU administration.

At this point the protestors decided to release a list of demands to end their occupation. The demands were largely political, spanning the gambit from ending all wars both foreign and domestic to making education – even through the doctorate level – completely free of charge to all American citizens. They knew that there was no way all of their demands would be met and that they would be residing in the business building until they were forcibly removed.

As the day progressed, students who received the email and were supportive of the cause began to amass and help the protest in whatever way was necessary. Police started arriving around the same time, but students easily outnumbered them. As the police started moving towards the doors, students started blocking their paths lining nearly 25 people in front of every door. Another hundred or so students took it upon themselves to block the road that lead directly to school which happened to be highway 1. Some of the on duty police officers had to walk away from the doors to redirect traffic

around the protestors in the streets. This lessened the pressure on the business building and gave the protestors a greater feeling of ease.

Just after noon the administration sent out another email to registered students stating that all classes that day were cancelled. JB was ecstatic; his protest was creating a big enough hindrance to garner some real attention from the people in charge, which is exactly what he wanted.

The rest of the day progressed without consequence but things started getting worse when night fell. San Francisco is cold year round, but Decembers were absolutely brutal. Students started leaving and the police called in a SWAT team to “diffuse” the situation before it went any further. Power was cut to the business building and the temperature started falling fast but the protestors inside were resolute and their passion about their cause fueled them through the night.

At about 4:00AM on December 10, 2009, the SWAT team made their move and smashed a window on the first floor and gained access to the building. It took them over half an hour to clear out enough desks from the stairwell to reach the students on the second floor. When they reached the protestors, JB and company were put in handcuffs and carted off to jail.

All arrested protestors were released the same day without having any formal charges filed against them by the San Francisco Police Department, but the SFSU administration saw to it that the students were punished. They were forced to pay for the

disruption they caused to the campus, for the extra work the administration had to do and for all police costs for the previous day.

The next week UC Berkeley tried a similar protest but it was carried out to a much smaller degree and ultimately had a smaller effect than the occupation of SFSU had. I say this not to diminish the efforts of those politically active Berkeley students but to illustrate just how important this protest was. It was the first of its type and therefore had the most impact.

I don't know that this protest really had all of the intended response that JB was looking to illicit, but it certainly got the ball rolling. It showed students that they did not have to put up with everything that the school administration was throwing at them; that they could take arms and really change the way things were done. Will this protest have the same lasting impression of Rosa Parks and her refusal to sit at the back of the bus? Probably not, but it was definitely a step in the right direction and I personally have immense admiration for JB and those other brave students in the business building.