



# The Student Strike that Won Ethnic Studies and Black Student College Admissions

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## Abstract

This article explores the student strike which won Ethnic Studies and Black college student admissions. The San Francisco State Strike of 1968 which shut down the campus for five months was unique in its vision, its intensity, its class composition, its strategies, and its relationship to both the Black community and non-Black student organizations. The event is significant because the creation of Ethnic Studies as an academic field has vastly expanded humanity's knowledge of African-American history and the history of other people of color, and the percentage of Black students completing four years of college more than doubled in the period following this strike and subsequent similar college movements. One of the authors was a leader of the Black Student Union Central Committee. The authors use interviews with the leaders, personal reflection, and archival material to draw conclusions about the reasons for the strike's success and long-lasting impact. Its lessons may have importance for the racial and social justice movements of today.

**Keywords** Black Studies · San Francisco State Strike · Black Student Union · Student movements · African-American · Nathan Hare · Danny Glover · Ethnic studies open admissions · Racism Hayakawa · Democratic centralism · Critical race theory

In 2018, there were 384 colleges and universities that offered degrees in ethnic studies in the USA (Oakland equity indicators, 2018). In 1967, there were zero. It was not legislation or a Governor's mandate or a task force that brought about the change. It was 20 young men and women with no money and no political connections who

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had decided that Black people had a right to study a truthful history of Black life at the 4-year colleges their parents' taxes were paying for. Their geographic base was a little-known California college, which enrolled only 4% Black students.

In this article, we will demonstrate that what appeared to be weaknesses in the geography and class position of the San Francisco State movement proved paradoxically to be its biggest strengths. For example, the fact that they had no money meant the strike leaders did not live in the fancy apartments that surrounded the campus. They lived in the Black community and often had jobs taking care of children or washing dishes or filing in a bank. Although proximity to the campus would seem to be indispensable for a student leader, in fact, these relations in the more distant working-class communities were ultimately pivotal to their victory.

## Previous Studies of the Strike

The two earliest examinations of the strike were prepared on behalf of a government commission (Orrick, 1969) and by individuals who had run the college during a portion of the strike (Smith, 1970). Orrick's work attempted to quote various sides of the strike: strike leaders, administrators, and the Mayor, for example, on issues like the actions of the Board of Trustees.

Author Robert Smith was the President of the college during the beginning of the strike.

The college campuses were full of activism at the time, raising issues about both Vietnam and racial injustice. There had been few victories in changing their racial composition and curriculum. The first academic studies to acknowledge the national significance of the San Francisco strike were two doctoral dissertations, one by Ferreira (2003) and the other by Ryan (2010). Martha Biondi has a chapter on the S.F. State strike in her book (2012) which concludes that Black campus movements began at HBCUs and in the Bay Area (Biondi, 2012, p.78). A book by these authors is the first fully devoted to the Black organizing at S.F. State (Epstein & Stringer, 2020).

## Methodology

One of the authors of this article, Bernard Stringer, was himself a member of the Central Committee of the Black Student Union, a leader of the strike, and a source of insider information in the article.

The article also draws from interviews with all of the other major leaders of the BSU. Stringer conducted interviews in the period between 2011 and 2020. Epstein conducted additional interviews in 2020. Stringer collected archival material throughout the strike and beyond, which included such items as newspapers and pamphlets produced by the BSU (Stringer).

Through the combination of personal insight, in-depth interviews, and archival materials, we have developed an analysis, which brings greater insight to the intentions, strategies, and actions of the participants than previous presentations.

It is now widely accepted that San Francisco State led the way in the movement to achieve ethnic studies (Biondi, 2012). But why? Why that campus? Why was that movement successful? And what were the results? Beyond the establishment of ethnic studies, what impact did it have on the broader American movement for racial justice?

In the process of answering these questions, we will illuminate several dimensions of the strike. First, it was highly organized with strategic discussions informed by the movements and revolutions taking place around the world at the time. Second, the leaders decided explicitly that they did not wish to have one or two “heroes” lead the movement. They organized a Central Committee and made decisions collectively. In contrast to the movements at more “elite” institutions, they actually had a personal need to win the demands. If they could not be admitted to the college, learn from culturally competent and knowledgeable faculty, or access financial aid, their lives and futures and those of their sisters and brothers would be directly affected. For this reason, their strategies were different from many other student movements. They were not protesting to make a political point; they were organizing to win concrete demands. Thus, the tactical decisions were directed toward that goal. And so, for example, while sit-ins (the tactic of many student movements) might generate headlines and sympathy, sympathy would not be sufficient to win these demands. They needed to actually shut the institution down to force action by their opponent, which, in this case, was the Board of Trustees. According to Third World Liberation Front leader Tony Miranda, “We decided, first of all, that student movements up to this point had been absolutely worthless in terms of effect” (Orrick, 1969, p. 129).

Another unique aspect of the strike was the approach to race, which we would argue has affected anti-racist consciousness ever since. The BSU strike leadership was exclusively Black people, building on a solidarity that has often been present because of 400 years of slavery, domination, and segregation and has not been well understood by whites, even to this day. The strike leaders also had caring and supportive relationships with Latina and Latino, Asian, Indigenous, and white students and faculty. And, although this collaboration was strong, the groups were not merged.

The San Francisco State movement contributed to the advancement of our practical and theoretical understanding of race in the USA. The strikers made an explicit contribution by creating a model, which is still in use in many movements to this day. Black people led because their conditions and history provided particular insight. Others acted as allies, providing other insights, resources, and participation but not trying to “take-over.”

And, theoretically, the S.F. State Strike was a perfect example of several principles of critical race theory. Critical race theory holds that racism is permanent and systemic in US society and that it is only ended in cases where ending it will be beneficial to powerful whites (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The San Francisco State Strike was a clear demonstration of both points. Racism was systemically built into the California Higher Ed. Master Plan, which sent Black and Brown students to community colleges (at best) instead of the 4-year state college and university system. This only ended when the 1968 strike successfully shut down the institution and the state government was unable to end the strike despite police beatings, hundreds of arrests, and death threats made to strike leaders. Greater repression only expanded the movement to other college campuses and further angered officials in San Francisco, including Mayor Alioto, who

wanted the 6-month crisis to end. The concessions made by powerful whites on the Board of Trustees were made because the situation was untenable, not because they had a change of heart about race.

We begin with an extensive discussion on the context of the strike and the visionary organizing period because the ideological and organizational structure of the Black Student Union and the allied organizations were unique within the student movement and the strike could not have taken place without them. The fact that the strike could continue for four and a half months depended entirely on the preparation for it. The strike was not spontaneous as many student struggles have been. It was 2 years in the preparation. After dissecting that preparation, we explain the strike itself and the aftermath. In this article, we hone in on the unique elements that explain its success. Author Bernard Stringer says “I have never met anyone who participated in the strike whose life was not completely altered by it.” Why? What made it unique? And why did it succeed?

## The Context of the Strike

In the latter half of the 1960s, San Francisco State College (now University) was both the best and the worst of places for a major strike by Black students. It was in a suburban-like area of San Francisco, surrounded by relatively fancy apartments. Most people outside of San Francisco had never heard of the college. And only 4% of the students were Black.

On the other hand, the city itself and the college were quite liberal. San Francisco boasted a militant union history, including a General Strike led by waterfront workers in 1934. In 1960, San Francisco was the site of unprecedented protests against the McCarthy anti-communist hearings of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) being held at San Francisco City Hall 1960. Before the San Francisco protests, many had simply accepted the harassment of McCarthy.

The college had created a unique innovation in the “experimental college” where the students planned and taught courses and started a tutorial program to serve the community. These programs were paid for by student government, which had a large budget drawn from student fees.

## The Early Visionaries and Their Approach

Jimmy Garrett studied aspects of San Francisco as the place to organize before he moved there in 1966. “I had been taught by Bob Moses and by others in SNCC. And based on the readings I had been doing on Fanon and Mao Zedong and others – you have to do a study of the area” (Rogers, 2009, p. 32). He says they did a modern historical study of San Francisco, the college system, and the master plan. Based on that study and his communications with colleagues in San Francisco, he chose the campus (Rogers, 2009).

There is a tendency to treat the movements of young people as erratic, unplanned adventures. This was not true of San Francisco State. Every element was planned and studied.

The greater discipline of Garrett and other BSU leaders resulted from a combination of factors. Garrett had not had the easy early life of many college students.

He was confined first by the segregated regulation of 1950s Texas, where he spent his early years and then by the segregation of Los Angeles. But as the Civil Rights movement unfolded, he became involved with CORE, then with SNCC, and then with the American Friends Service Committee and Marxist study groups. He says, "I was trained." (Garrett, 2019).

Protest was not an extracurricular activity. When he got to San Francisco State, he was able to make several strategic decisions, which can be summarized as a tight conception of the goal and a broad conception of the tactics. His intention was that San Francisco State would be transformed so that it could "act as a resource base for the Black community" (Rogers, 2009).

He and the other early leaders used tactics to achieve that goal that were exceptionally broad. They thought, first, that all Black students needed to be united behind a conception of themselves as "Black." Garrett also thought that the relatively liberal white president of the college, John Summerskill, should and could be turned into somewhat of an ally. Unlike many of us who have trouble talking with those we consider "on the other side," Jimmy walked prospective students into Summerskill's office to be admitted, proposed how Black Studies should be organized, and joked around with the college President. But he also criticized Summerskill in press conferences (Summerskill, 1967). The BSU leaders communicated with those in power, but they did allow their perspective or actions to be altered by this tactical communication.

Jerry Varnado arrived at the campus a bit earlier than Jimmy. He had also been disciplined by a hard life. He grew up in the "terrorist state of Mississippi," and he joined the Air Force to get away. Then he was court-martialed and spent several months doing hard labor. When he arrived on the State campus, there were estimated to be 18,000 students in total and 150 Black students. All of his family was far away, and Jerry had never gone to school with white people before. Jerry says he just wanted to learn some Black history; he did not really know how hard that would be to achieve (Varnado, 2016).

And Jerry became a powerful recruiter of new students. For example, he was the person, who recruited the football players to participate in the strike. Stringer says, "Jerry would come by our place in the Fillmore and hang out with us, and he's the one who recruited us to the strike." This was a contribution to the whole movement because the loss of the Black football players meant that a once-winning football team started losing games. This upset a lot of people, especially the coach.

Marvin X, a poet and activist, said this of Jerry on the occasion of his passing in September 2021:

In my early days at San Francisco State University, even after I joined the Negro Students Association, there were some Negro students who were more blue than black. I wondered about those students who didn't come to the NSA especially during the fight to morph into the BSU. Even myself had doubts about the change to BSU, so how could I decry the Frat brothers and sisters playing Whist in the cafeteria "bid nigga, bid, you black radicals shut the fuk up." Then the revolution came, from Negro to Black. The BSU took over from Negro Students Association, we submitted to Black. Even the Frat boys submitted, Jerry Varnado among

the crew of frat boys and sorority girls who flipped into blackness and were true (Marvin X, 2021).

So these early organizers were different from other college student movement leaders in the North in several ways: Their class backgrounds were rooted in the Southern Black working class, and they adopted a planned long-term approach to the tactics of organizing, including the gathering of all of the Black students on the campus into one united organization, defined as “Black” rather than “Negro.”

Previous organizations had “Negro” in their title. There was a meeting in the library of seven students at S.F. State: Patricia Rivera, Maryom Al-Wadi, Judy Hart, JoAnn Mitchell, George Murray, Benny Stewart, and Jimmie Garrett. Patricia Rivera came up with the term Black Student Union to identify the new, unifying organization.

## How BSU Leaders Built the Movement and Led the Strike

### Early Struggles: Managing the Tension Between Unity and Independent Action

In 1967, some white students were suspended for publishing what was considered indecent material in a campus paper called *Open Process*. In November 1967, Black students were suspended for a fight between themselves and the editor of a different paper, the *Gater*, which published material demeaning to Black students and Black leaders such as Muhammed Ali. The white students were reinstated. The Black students were not. On December 6, there was a rally that included members of the BSU, Black high school students from the community, white students who had been involved in anti-war protests on campus, and students who were protesting the firing of a professor.

President Summerskill considered the bringing together of all these groups to be a watershed moment for the protest movement at San Francisco State. He said this had never happened before (Orrick, 1969, p. 24). He was recognizing something which would become a defining characteristic of the strike — the possibility of completely unified strike action under Black leadership. Both joint actions and separate organizing continued throughout the next several years.

### The Strike Itself Begins

The Black Student Union prepared the initial ten demands, which included a demand for an independent Black Studies Department; open admissions for Black students; the rehiring of a very effective Black instructor, George Murray; the firing of the financial aid administrator, Helen Bedesen; a full professorship and equitable pay for the renowned head of Black Studies, Nathan Hare; 20 full-time teaching positions for Black Studies; and no disciplinary action against strike participants. George Murray had been fired because of militant statements he had made at off-campus events.

On November 6, 1968, the strike started with groups of BSU students going into classrooms and “dismissing” the classes. They were supported in this by other students. The BSU had planned for a short strike, but as Colbert tells it, “the students

were leading us” (Colbert, 2016). They were angry, and they wanted the strike to continue.

As the strike continued, Raza, Asian, and Indigenous students in the Third World Liberation Front presented another five demands. All 15 demands were supported by all of the strikers, and there were meetings between leaders of the BSU, Students for a Democratic Society, and the TWLF. However, the leadership of the strike remained in the hands of the BSU Central Committee. The Black students had initiated the struggle because the situation of Black people was so horrible in regard to educational equity, and there was a Black Civil Rights movement, which people could learn from.

The pattern continues to this day and is rooted in the persistent reality that anti-Blackness is a thing unto itself. There is racism that affects all groups of Black and Brown people, but in many areas, the differential for Black people is most overwhelming. The racial wealth gap is largest between Black and white people. The differential in life expectancy is largest between Blacks and whites. A majority of the people living on the street in Oakland and other cities are Black men — and on and on. So in current movements like the anti-police terror movement and some portions of the housing movement, Black people are leading.

Events like the S.F. State Strike eventually led much of the US movement to accept the idea of Black leadership, not just for Black people but for everyone. So Stacy Abrams, for example, is an icon for white as well as Black progressives. In other multi-racial countries, this is still not the case. France, for example, is noted for its militant movements and strikes. But it is a stunning example of a country where the government and much of the social justice movement still reject the idea of leadership from the most oppressed immigrant and racialized groups. In 2021, for example, the French government actually banned a university student organization because it “allowed” Black students to have meetings separate from the total student group.

### **Unity with the Faculty**

In addition to this complex and effective unity across racial lines, the BSU also had unity with the faculty union, which took the unusual move of going on strike in support of the student demands. On January 6, 1969, 2 months into the strike, the American Federation of Teachers chapter set up a picket line at the entrance to the campus. They began something that had never happened before. Their 2-month strike included traditional labor issues, but it was essentially in support of the student demands (Smith, 2014, p. 242). This action was another remarkable feature of this strike. Much of the faculty was genuinely convinced that the system was racist, and they were willing to risk their jobs and salaries to force change. And, of course, this added greatly to the strike’s efficacy. The students obviously were not going to class without a professor.

## Community

The BSU developed a structure and practice that lasted throughout the strike. By the time the strike began, Jimmie Garrett had left the campus. Bennie Stewart, Jerry Vernardo, Terry Collins, Bernard Stringer, Danny Glover, Nesbit Crutchfield, Arnold Townsend, Sharon Truskanoff, George Colbert, Ramona Tascoe, Don Smothers, Sharon Jones, Carlotta Simon, and others played a variety of leadership roles among the students, and Dr. Nathan Hare led the development of what was to become the Black Studies philosophy and curriculum.

For those on the BSU Central Committee, there were a number of expectations, which can be credited with the expanding support and the solid organizing of the strike. People had various responsibilities. Terry Collins, for instance, reported that he was one of those responsible for meeting with the allied organizations of TWLF and SDS (Collins, 2016). Bernard was the leader of the Presidium, part of the organizational structure of the BSU, which ensured that leaders who might be taken out of the struggle by arrest could be replaced by an alternate. Danny Glover had some responsibilities for the cultural work. Arnold Townsend did a great deal of community work, and so on.

And everyone was ultimately responsible for relationships with the community. Many US student movements sought support from local communities during the 1960s. At San Francisco State, the Black students were already part of the community. Danny Glover's parents were leaders of the San Francisco postal union, and he had helped them with their union work from a young age (Glover, 2019). Clarence Thomas, who had been one of the students activists before the strike, left San Francisco State to become a longshore worker just as his father and grandfather had been. There was no question that his union would support the student strike. Bennie Stewart attended San Francisco schools from elementary through high school. It would be his friends and former classmates who would directly benefit if more students were admitted to S.F. State. And Terry Collins did draft counseling in the community during the height of the Vietnam war; so he had some eager contacts. In addition to their natural contacts, the community relationship was an essential aspect of their philosophy. Their reason for creating Black Studies as an academic discipline was to study theory at college and put it in practice in the community. They saw no separation between these two roles. One of the critiques raised by the veteran strikers now is that Black Studies classes are not sufficiently dedicated to solving the serious problems of the Black community.

## Discipline, Perseverance, and Study

Their study of the revolutionary movements of the period led them to a disciplined structure and practice. Bernard recalls that their meetings could last up to 9 hours. Once they had reached a conclusion, they applied the principle of democratic centralism: Everyone carried out the decisions that had been made collectively. They developed this practice partly from studying the writings of revolutionaries at the time. They read Mao's Red Book and studied the Algerian revolution, for example.



Many of the BSU leaders were arrested and charged with felonies repeatedly. This did not cause them to back away from the strike. They stayed in “safe houses” when they thought the police were coming to their homes. One leader was told by the police, “We have four bullets picked out for you and your friends.” But they did not back down. The strike became larger and more effective, and the bloody tactics of the police actually brought more support to the strike.

On January 23, 1969, a thousand students gathered on the campus for a rally. Four-hundred and thirty-five were arrested in the “mass bust.” The spirit of those being carried off to jail was raucous and defiant. The arrests added new responsibilities for bail, lawyers, and court dates. But the strike continued.

### **Response of the Board of Trustees and the Administration**

A flier distributed by the SDS chapter informed the campus about the class position of the Board of Trustees. Samuel Mosher was an oil tycoon. William Roth was a director of Crown-Zellerbach, the largest paper producer in the USA. Dudley Swim sat on the Board of the DelMonte Corporation (Students for a Democratic Society, 1968).

They, along with Chancellor Dumke, had an unsurprisingly hostile response to the strike. They wanted it to end, and they made a variety of demands on the three men who served as presidents during this period. President Summerskill, the most liberal of the three, had made concessions to the BSU demands. He resigned in February 1968 to become effective in September of that year. In May, however, Chancellor Dumke asked him to resign immediately following a sit-in at the Administration building.

Professor Robert Smith became President then, and in September 1968, he announced the creation of a Black Studies Department with Nathan Hare appointed as Acting Chair. The Chancellor ordered Smith to suspend Adjunct Professor and Black Panther member George Murray because of militant statements he had made. Smith at first refused.

After the student strike began in November, there were confrontations and closures of the campus. Smith tried to reopen the campus with a series of convocations which became very hostile. On November 26, 1968, he resigned.

Hayakawa was named President. He pulled a confrontational stunt. Strikers were using a sound truck. Hayakawa jumped up on the truck and began pulling out the wires. Pictures were taken; the images made nationwide news; and Hayakawa became the new darling of the American right-wing. It did not, however, end the strike, which continued and even escalated after the beginning of the faculty strike.

Two Superior Court judges ordered the AFT to end their strike. When they did not comply, the trustees finally authorized a committee to negotiate with the faculty union. Their strike ended in February 1969. Then, in March 1969, the administration appointed a Select Committee to negotiate with the BSU and Third World Liberation Front. BSU and TWLF leaders reached an agreement with the college administration and ended the strike on March 20, 1969.

## The Results

### Winning the Demands

A central issue for the strikers was the admission of Black and Brown students, and this demand was won very decisively. The year after the strike, in fall 1969, San Francisco State enrolled the largest portion of Black students ever in the history of US higher education (outside of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

A second central issue was the creation of independent ethnic studies programs. The Black Studies Department and other ethnic studies departments were created, and now, S.F. State stands as the first and only College of Ethnic Studies in the nation. And other departments of ethnic studies developed across the country. Currently, the College of Ethnic Studies prides itself on the fact that taking even one ethnic studies class increases the graduation rates of students at the university.

Reforming financial aid was another demand, which was met by the administration (Wilmot, 1968).

Demands having to do with amnesty were denied, and neither the instructor, George Murray, nor the leader of Black Studies, Nathan Hare, was rehired. The denial of amnesty and the loss of Nathan Hare's leadership were particularly devastating. Several strike leaders went to jail for a year or more, and Nathan Hare's wisdom was critical to the concept and curriculum of Black Studies. He operated as an "in exile" leader to those shaping Black Studies in the year following the strike. But later, the college hired individuals who had nothing to do with the strike to run the Black Studies department.

### Conclusions

History has acknowledged the San Francisco State Strike to have been a victory and a turning point in the effort to create a more just higher education system in the USA. It led to the admission of hundreds of thousands more Black and Brown students and the creation of Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline with relative independence on many college campuses. And these victories led to a vast expansion in the number of Black and Brown people becoming college faculty; to the reasonable expectation by parents that their children could enter 4-year colleges; to an expansion of scholarship on the politics, economics, history, and culture of Black and Brown people; and to a complex model of Black-led, multi-racial organizing that survives to this day.

A number of factors led to this victory. All of them hinged on the discipline, the tenacity, and the courage of the Black working-class men and women who led the strike.

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