March 4, 2020
Dr. Carol Christ  
Office of the Chancellor University of California, Berkeley  
200 California Hall #1500  
Berkeley, CA 94720

To Chancellor Christ:

The University of California at Berkeley rests upon Huichin, the traditional homelands of Chochenyo Ohlone. We are a collective of Ethnic Studies graduate students who unite as guests on Huichin. As beneficiaries of a settler-colonial institution, we must always question and work to decolonize our relationships with our communities, and with the land and water. This is not a land acknowledgement – it is an articulation of our underlying solidarity with local and global Indigenous resistance. We write to affirm our responsibility to this place, a site of historic violence and ongoing dispossession, which demands commitment to a process of reparations that includes access to dignified housing for all marginalized communities. Inspired by the courage of the UC Santa Cruz student strikers, we participate in the movement for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) with a vision of a future where land, labor, and life are respected in mutuality and reciprocity.

We join faculty, staff, and undergraduate students in solidarity to denounce the violent and retaliatory measures taken by President Janet Napolitano and the University of California Office of the President against the UCSC strikers. We call on the UC Berkeley administration to demilitarize the UCPD and provide a COLA that meets graduate students’ basic needs for food and shelter. We heed the call to action emerging from the wildcat strikes at UC Santa Cruz, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Davis by affirming the demands uniformly ratified across all UC campuses for the March 5th statewide day of action, including:

(1) The immediate reinstatement and guaranteed appointments for all dismissed UCSC graduate students; (2) a cost of living adjustment for each and every graduate student
regardless of residence, visa category, documentation, or funding and employment status; (3) that the UC administration drops ULP charges against UAW 2965; (4) the demilitarization of campus police, who have intimidated, assaulted, and arrested protesters; and (5) the elimination of single-semester appointments for UC/AFT lecturers.

We affirm that the strike emerges from the precarious conditions that are characteristic of the lives of students, lecturers, and at large, all exploited workers. We join those engaging with work stoppages and grading strikes across the UC campuses in the fight for a more secure livelihood. Furthermore, the UC Berkeley administration has identified the recruitment and retention of underrepresented minority students as a top priority, and has recently initiated the process of becoming a Hispanic Serving Institution. Yet UC Berkeley cannot truly serve underrepresented graduate students, whose labor is integral to the core mission of the university, if the campus refuses to compensate student workers to meet their basic needs. Without a liveable wage, such initiatives provide only the veneer of procedural diversity. Following the leadership of our colleagues in African American Studies, we declare that the Ethnic Studies graduate students are strike-ready.

As Indigenous graduate students and graduate students of color, we are indebted to historic student movements such as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a coalition initiated by the Afro-American Student Union (AASU) in 1969. When the Mexican American Student Confederation, Native American Student Association, and Asian American Political Alliance joined the AASU as the TWLF, they focused their collective power on a vision for a Third World College -- an autonomous college within, yet beyond, the university system. Fifty years later, the departments, programs, and curricula we have today represent only a fraction of the demands made in 1969. Our current moment of struggle is a reactivation of this cultural memory and an invitation to recommit to the TWLF’s guiding principles of solidarity, self-determination, and education that is relevant to and in partnership with racialized, marginalized, and minoritized communities. The original TWLF demands remind us that the current COLA struggles emerge from a larger context: the historically unjust and unequal distribution of resources rooted in systems of power such as white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism. Our demand for equitable housing and pay for academic workers includes a commitment to decolonize the university and struggle for a just and equitable society for all.

Signed,

The Graduate Students of the Ethnic Studies Department