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At Rallies Across the Country, Students Turn Out in Defense of Public Education

By Paige Chapman and Eric Kelderman

Less than a month before midterm elections, students, faculty members, and advocacy groups held rallies on campuses across the country on Thursday to show elected officials their support for public higher education.

At Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, for example, several hundred people gathered on the campus's parade grounds for a jazz-inspired "funeral" for higher education. Some participants, dressed in black carried a coffin labeled "education," while others carried flags representing language programs that the university has cut to cope with shrinking state appropriations.

More program and job cuts are likely, as the state is struggling to close a deficit in its current budget year, and Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican, has said that higher-education funds could be cut by as much as 35 percent in the budget that lawmakers will craft next year.

The Baton Rouge event was organized by a grass-roots group called Proud Students, along with the LSU Graduate Student Association, the Faculty Senate, and union groups representing university staff members and schoolteachers. Bradley Wood, a senior at Louisiana State and co-founder of Proud Students, said the group has sent letters to candidates for statewide office warning about the effects of such deep cuts, but it has yet to get responses from those politicians.

On several campuses of the University of California, which lost \$637-million in state appropriations last year, groups also held events to mark Thursday's "National Day of Action to Defend Public Education."

At the University of California at Berkeley, demonstrators at a variety of events protested the cuts and their effects on public colleges and universities. One event, a sit-in in a library reading room, drew some 500 participants before the campus police blocked access. The demonstrators banged on desks and chanted

"Whose university? Our university!" and several hundred remained in the room as of late afternoon, but there were no reports of arrests, according to the university's News Center.

Other demonstrations at Berkeley included a large outdoor rally and "teach-outs," in which professors held classes outside. Ignacio Chapela, an associate professor of environmental science at Berkeley, was one who held his classes outside on Thursday. Mr. Chapela said many students are upset about the university's student-fee increase of more than 30 percent, as well as an influx of out-of-state enrollment, to compensate for lost funds.

"Students are becoming the cash cow for the institution because the university is banking on whatever they can pay," Mr. Chapela said. "They're standing up for what they believe to be wrong budgetary policies in both the state and the nation."

Elsewhere, students, faculty and staff members, and concerned community members gathered at a rally at the University of Minnesota and urged state officials to designate money for "education, not administration," reported Minnesota Public Radio.

In Massachusetts, a rally at the Statehouse was scheduled to cap a six-day march across the state protesting cuts in state money for higher education.

And at Northeastern University, a private institution in Boston, a student group that advocates on behalf of nonunion workers held a teach-in about the growing involvement of corporations in the operations and support of higher education.

Claire Lewis, a sophomore at Northeastern and a member of the Progressive Student Alliance, said the university is becoming "corporatized" by hiring nonunion workers for custodial and food services, and by relying too much on adjunct faculty members without concern for the quality of education.

Not all groups that sympathize with the issues raised by the National Day of Action chose to stage events on Thursday.

Brian Turner, chairman of the department of political science at Randolph-Macon College and secretary of the Assembly of State for the American Association of University Professors in Virginia, said his organization is concerned about the effect of budget cuts, but would focus its activities around the beginning of the calendar year, "when the General Assembly is in session."