



## A Manifesto

Written by:  
Defend the Oxford Tract  
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Back in 2012, when the Gill Tract Community Farm was in the middle of an occupation, a new society-wide awareness about the need for urban agriculture was awakened, with thousands of people from across the Bay Area and the country visiting the farm, offering their support. Although Dean Keith Gillespie of the College of Natural Resources (CNR) at UC Berkeley initially disregarded the demands of the occupiers, under this social pressure he was forced to express his support of the University's commitment to Agricultural Education. He reminded us all that "Berkeley is the birthplace of the University of California's research, instructional, and cooperative extension programs in agriculture and natural resources. Those programs have evolved over time in response to social needs and opportunities. The process of change is never comfortable, but to be productive it must be based upon a civil and inclusive dialogue." [1]

Now, five years later, we face a similar dilemma. In the context of a global political economy that prioritizes the exchange-value of land (commodifying the land and everything humanity produces on it) it is clear that the Oxford Tract must be persevered as a space of alternative agricultural possibilities. Students have been able to use this land not only to practice more sustainable, agro-ecological food production practices, but also to experience a space of self-governance and education, where students and the community are able to practice direct-democracy and learn about land-use and the world on which we rely for sustenance. However, similar to the struggles faced by the Gill Tract, the UC Berkeley Administration has disregarded the inherent use-value of this land for students' learning and practice of citizenship, and instead has reinforced the dominant vision of land's worth as nothing more than its exchange value. In the context of the Bay Area's exorbitant housing prices, also caused by regional economic and political inequalities, the Administration sees our research space simply as land more valuable in the housing market than as an aide in the cultivation of life and experiential learning.

Since the initial conversations concerning the prospective development of the Oxford Tract, namely the release of the Housing Master Plan Task Force Report [2] in January of this year, the numerous stakeholders of the Oxford Tract have been largely left out of any "civil and inclusive dialogue" [1] in regards to the proposition. In a small attempt to reconcile this, the Oxford Tract Planning Committee was formed (albeit initially with no undergraduate representation) to assess the fiscal viability of relocating the Oxford Tract facilities to other locations proposed by the Task Force.

Administration within CNR were assigned with finalizing the compilation of this report, effectively giving voice to the many stakeholders with an on-the-ground (i.e. the individuals most closely in contact with the land) understanding of the inability to relocate the Oxford Tract. Not only has this report not been

released, but it hasn't even been completed, missing its deadline for publication by three months! Without this report, we can only fear that the Administration is moving actions forward, without our knowledge, without our voice, and without an adequate understanding of the consequences of such a decision.

***We are no longer willing to take a passive role in these conversations and decisions. We demand that our voice be heard, since we too are stakeholders.***

#### **THE OXFORD TRACT - A BRIEF HISTORY**

The Oxford Tract has played an historic role in defining the University of California, Berkeley as an institution of agricultural and natural resource studies. In 1923, the State Commission unanimously decided to retain the College of Agriculture "as a part of the University at Berkeley, provided that agricultural land could be secured conveniently near campus." [3] This mandate was cited by the Secretary of Regents in 1948, when the Regents decided against a development on the Oxford Tract, stating that "the Oxford Tract represents the minimum amount of land for outdoor laboratory purposes convenient to indoor laboratories and classrooms which will permit the University of California College of Agriculture to carry on advanced instruction and research in agriculture on the Berkeley campus." [3] Additionally, UC Berkeley is recognized within the UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (DANR) as a Land-Grant University, meaning the University receives funding in accordance with the Fed Morrill Act (1887), by which it must maintain programs in agriculture, engineering, and experiential learning. Funding for Universities in the DANR program (which also includes UC Davis and UC Riverside) come from public (federal and state) and private sources, totaling \$237 million annually. These funds contribute substantially to research for the University, as well as covering salaries for professors in CNR [4].

In 1948, the Regents recognized that "without [the Oxford Tract] the State cannot maintain either a great College of Agriculture or a great University in Berkeley" [3]. This decision to not develop was influenced by words from the then President of UC Berkeley, Robert Gordon Sproul, stating that "the University has a high moral obligation, if no legal duty, both to private donors and citizens of the State to continue providing adequate facilities for the College of Agriculture" [3]. Simply stated, if the Oxford Tract ceases to exist, then the agriculture programs at UC Berkeley would be rendered inadequate, and funding from the DANR could be expected to come to a halt.

Despite these powerful statements from the University's past Administration, Dean Gilless has refused to support us publicly, while only offering a financial report that would show that the moving of Oxford Tract facilities would not be in the economic interest of the University. This report has been, for seven months, nonexistent, and while an "Impacts Report"[5] was published last September (2016) expressing strong concerns against the moving of the Oxford Tract facilities, we have since received no formal statement of the Dean's support of our demands to keep the Oxford Tract as is.

Less support, if that's even possible, has come from our newest Chancellor, Carol T. Christ, along with some blatant ignorance in her understanding of how soil works--especially in that it cannot simply be dug up and readministered elsewhere. When we met with her on March 6th, 2017, she informed us that she had been in conversation with Dean Gilless since the previous September, and that their discussions consisted of determining "which of those uses [at the Oxford Tract] could be moved; which of them couldn't be moved; which have to be on the main campus; and which could be down at the Gill Tract." [6] Her perspective is severely outdated, for even in 1945, the Dean of the College of Agriculture knew that functions at the Oxford Tract "could not be located even so far as the Gill Tract" [3] in compliance with the 1921 mandate, which guarantees agricultural facilities "conveniently near the campus" [3].

The Chancellor claims to be concerned with where facilities could "be moved without compromising the research program[s]" [6] conducted on them--however, the experiments conducted on the Oxford Tract *cannot* be "moved without compromising" their various demands, which Dean Gilless formally acknowledged in September (2016):

"The increased number of researchers whose field research needs would now need to be accommodated in the limited Gill tract field area would undoubtedly create a situation in which all needs/requests could not be met. Further research will be needed to know whether additional land could be found to accommodate certain projects that could not be accommodated at this site. Current uses of the Oxford Tract field area include not only researcher plantings but also an outdoor classroom used in teaching, the student organic gardens also used in teaching, and the Urban Bee Garden, a bee behavioral study area, all of which necessitate frequent visitation by students and the public. Oxford Tract is also currently the only UC Berkeley field site at which recombinant plants can be propagated under federal permit. The permit requires that the field site limit access of the public. As such, the Oxford tract currently has a relatively robust security system" [5].

As the University continues to make tremendous strides in its Agroecology and Plant and Microbial Biology programs there has also been "the expectation that certain faculty members who had been attracted to Berkeley because of the proximity and availability of these needed research facilities would move their programs to another institution where the research needs could be better met"[5]. Furthermore, beyond research, this land has been a space of student agency, participatory governance, and a location where hundreds of educational events have taken place, including the University's largest student-facilitated DeCal (Intro to Organic Gardening and Food Justice), which takes place in the SOGA garden each spring, providing experiential learning for over 120 students annually.

In the same meeting, the Chancellor illuminated the Administration's overarching philosophy on development when she was asked about why, when student housing is so lacking, there were prospects to build a hotel on a University-owned vacant site: "The question is what's the highest and best use. That's a really important question. The question is 'could the University make more money if it used it for commercial uses, or is a better use of it housing?' So that's a really interesting question, but there is no plan to build a hotel right now"[6]. If the University decides to destroy this land by developing it, based on a short-term analysis of its current "market" value in the context of a Bay Area housing bubble, the University forgoes any long-term investment in this land's use value in the sphere of education, research, and the construction of students' active stewardship and citizenship.

This calls into question the true intentions of the Administration in their aggressive push for ever more University owned developments. Are they looking to solve the student housing crisis in efficient, innovative, and affordable ways, or, both in the Chancellor's own words, "looking for creative thinking about this issue,"[6] or are they looking to "make more money"? The neoliberal underpinnings of the University of California system are more visible than ever. Growing the assets of the corporate university for the purpose of profit is their objective. And in a very clear trivialization of the severity of this issue, the Chancellor concluded our first meeting by *assuring* us not to "think that the bulldozers are going to come down the street in two weeks. This is years away"[6].

**MAKE NO MISTAKE! THE BULLDOZERS ARE COMING!**

It must be noted that those of us representing the Oxford Tract are **by no means anti-housing** by being pro-research space, pro-food security, pro-urban agriculture, and pro-student governance. Further, we are not only in support of developing student housing, we specifically stand for *affordable* student housing for those most marginalized—something our Administration thinks they are providing

when they construct brand new, market rate, luxury apartments and dormitories. The University is attempting to frame this issue as a choice between agricultural research and student housing. This is a typical strategy, explicitly pitting against each other two incredibly important social issues, as a zero-sum tradeoff. We reject this short-sighted reformist perspective, and instead **demand that we discuss the Oxford Tract as one part of a broader vision of how to simultaneously promote access to fresh food and affordable housing in the Bay Area.**

Our position on combating hunger and homelessness on UC Berkeley campus aligns with the initiatives of the Basic Needs Security (BNS) Coalition (of which we are a fiscally funded participant) in that these two basic student needs are going ever more unmet—with 40% of UC students food insecure [7]. BNS initiatives to increase food security, housing security, financial security, and crisis resolution, demand that each need is remedied from multiple angles—one of which being education. The Oxford Tract is a vital provider of experiential education around food production, understandings of where food comes from, and what goes into our food under various, sometimes contrasting, farming styles (as in Agroecology vs Industrial Agriculture).

Additionally, the Student Organic Garden provides students with countless opportunities (i.e. internships, DeCal courses, volunteering, etc.) in which to discuss and understand food justice and environmental justice topics, maintain leadership positions, acquire job experience in a farming organization, and understand what goes into caring for yourself and others under a socially just and equitable food system. Not to mention that the Tract as a whole annually donates hundreds of pounds of fresh organic produce to the UC Berkeley Food Pantry, directly serving students. A holistic understanding of agriculture, food systems, and personal health are at the core of the teachings conducted on the Oxford Tract, and at the core of the mission of reducing hunger and homelessness on UC campuses. The aforementioned programs at the Oxford Tract and the Student Organic Garden receive grants from both private and public stakeholders for being positive players as community educators of the principles of Agroecology, to whom the University has a financial, legal, and moral obligation.

. . .

Not only does the current attitude of the University stand against the very principles of Agroecology that we study and share (principles we have learned while our feet were planted in the soil at the Oxford Tract), the UC Berkeley Administration has proven itself to be under-qualified when speaking on behalf of the operations that take place at the Oxford Tract and the Student Organic Garden. So when the Chancellor says "I think the Student Organic Garden is completely compatible with housing there, and I

would assume that it would stay there" or "I think student organic gardens are really important. I support them,"[5] not only is she undermining the various and tremendous services and accomplishments for which the Oxford Tract is directly responsible, we are left with the impression that she has been misinformed about the "compatibility" of her "assumptions" versus the real situation with which we are faced.

That we are even under threat of development is a direct insult coming from the University. We wish for everyone to know that based on the actions of the University Administration, **UC Berkeley does not support the open practicing of Urban Agroecology or its greater social, economic, and ecological goals, including Climate Change mitigation.**

We challenge any claim from Chancellor Carol T. Christ that the University Administration is in contradiction with this statement. If the University decides to develop on the Oxford Tract, then they ought to lose their status as a Land-Grant University and any and all funding from the DANR, for they will not be upholding their obligation "to serve California through the creation, development and application of knowledge in agricultural, natural and human resources"[4]. As it stands, we do not believe that the University supports our research, education, or autonomy as students, faculty, and members of a community.

And to Dean Gilles: if the Oxford Tract goes under, and you've done nothing more than the nothing done up to now to impede its going under, then you are culpable (by association and complacency) for its *having gone under*.

When confronted with incertitude, the insights of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire come to mind: **"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral"**.

#### CITATIONS

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