

INJUSTICE AT CIIS!

For Immediate Release:

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Graduate Students Pursue Legal Action Against California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS)

Following months of unsuccessful negotiations with school administrators to safeguard their education

(San Francisco, October 25, 2011)-- Thirty-eight students out of a department of fifty have retained the Law Offices of Michael S. Sorgen to pursue legal action against the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) following the suspension of two core faculty of the Social and Cultural Anthropology (SCA) Department, Chair Richard Shapiro and Professor Angana Chatterji. These students believe the investigation into Chatterji and Shapiro has been in violation of institutional due process and protocols and are raising questions regarding the authority and ethics of particular administrators. The matter is currently before a Faculty Hearing Board, which is slated to convene later this week.

"Our initial analysis leads us to believe there to be serious violations of student rights," states Sorgen, who has sent multiple letters to the Institute requesting a meeting with CIIS counsel and Administration since August 3, but this meeting has yet to materialize. The Law Offices of Michael S. Sorgen litigates matters pertaining to civil rights and education at federal and state levels, and one of their specializations is student rights.

The proceedings at CIIS have thrown Anthropology students' lives and education into uncertainty, resulting in detrimental impacts on their physical and emotional well-being. Many have disenrolled and all have struggled to piece together their lives with the disruption and damage to academic studies and community-based advocacy work; some are scrambling for livelihoods without financial aid, while international students had to choose between paying for unwanted classes and losing their student visas. The situation has been exacerbated by what they strongly feel has been mistreatment by CIIS and the circulation of lies by Administration to justify the recent actions taken against core Anthropology faculty and a majority of students. Many students believe administrative actions have been inconsistent in dealing with student complaints. In late April 2011, a grievance was filed against a part-time faculty by 36 students, and students have received no formal report regarding their complaint to date; they suspect the investigation into the part-time faculty was used as a façade to extract information from students to build a case for what they understand as a "witch hunt" leading to the suspension of the two professors.

Unnamed students who participated in the investigation have stated it is not their intent to 'bring down' the department, but have struggled to have their concerns and issues heard preceding the investigation. Other students demanding the reinstatement of faculty are concerned that the Administration is using student concerns as fuel to dismantle the department. The Student Handbook outlines a formal grievance procedure, and many students demanding Chatterji and Shapiro's reinstatement do not understand why it has been bypassed, nor why the two faculty have been banned from teaching and advising during these proceedings. Moreover, many communications by the Academic Vice President (AVP) and Dean of Students (DoS) appear to be contradictory around the suspension and the investigation.

Many students are disturbed that the proceedings seem in opposition to all institutional and faculty-led review mechanisms, which indicate high student satisfaction rates and a well-functioning department, including the promotion Chatterji received in 2009 (with outstanding commendations) and the renewal of Shapiro's contract on April 1, 2011. For more than three months, students have repeatedly requested accountability and clarifications from CIIS Administration around the proceedings toward safeguarding their education and well-being. They say that their complaints, questions, and requests for meetings, starting 6/28, did not result in a collective meeting with Administration until 8/26. Students were disappointed that this meeting did not address their needs satisfactorily, and on September 8, 39 students signed a symbolic no-confidence motion against the DoS and the AVP, who also holds the titles of Interim Anthropology Department Chair, Dean of Faculty, Chief Academic Officer and Secretary to the Board of Trustees.

The Academic Vice President has recommended termination of Chatterji and Shapiro to the Hearing Board, and students now believe that their dismissal was the objective of particular administrators preceding May, when the AVP claims to have initiated the investigation. A worker in higher administration has just placed on record a ten-page statement, which has been submitted to the Faculty Hearing Board. The statement describes events that led to the worker's understanding that the Dean of Students sought to instigate an investigation targeting Professors Richard Shapiro and Angana Chatterji and the

Anthropology Department, beginning in March 2011, and that she requested and obtained permission from the AVP in April 2011 to do so. Further, the statement details tactics of the 'investigation' that the worker witnessed and experienced, including the coercive solicitation of student complaints through promises of 'protection' and compensation for those willing to participate, and intimidation for those unwilling (to participate.) This statement is in contradiction to CIIS Administration's October 14 'fact' sheet which states: "It was not proactively initiated by the CIIS Administration."

"We just learned about this employee statement indicating that Dean of Students initiated this investigation proactively in the Spring, confirming what students suspected. We are outraged and appalled to hear about the coercive solicitation of student complaints-- how is this 'research' or ethical? The ways in which administrators continue to broadcast 'facts' in disregard of what has already been communicated to students is a gross betrayal of student trust in the administrative procedure and administration claims of good faith," said Tanisha Payton, an SCA doctoral student.

Elizabeth J. Pimentel, an MA student, adds, "Chatterji and Shapiro were tried, judged and sentenced before they could ever respond to allegations made against them. Then they were told not to speak of it, and asked to be available for the remainder of the investigation, making Chatterji's human rights work in Indian-administered Kashmir impossible. We are extremely concerned for communities and those struggling for justice in Kashmir."

The latest actions by the Administration also include a publicly circulated 'fact' sheet dated 10/14 on the investigation of the Anthropology Department which students can refute point-by-point based on their interactions and documented exchanges with CIIS Administrators. Students perceive their mistreatment by CIIS as part of a trend in higher education toward the consolidation of autocratic administrative power and the dissipation of faculty and student rights. The Institute does not have a tenure system, nor does it have a faculty, student or staff union. Professor Shapiro has been at the Institute for 25 years, and Professor Chatterji has been there for 14 years. Both have been vocal advocates for collaborative governance and tenure.

The Department's curriculum prioritizes social justice and advocacy research and is connected to community organizations and human rights activists around the world. "My work this summer was in support of refugee rights in Burma, and I had to cut my trip short because of the suspension of my advisor," stated Jen Cordaro, another doctoral student in the Anthropology Department. "This targeting of our faculty has wide-reaching repercussions on marginalized communities around the world-- these damages are immeasurable."

On October 15, 40+ SCA students and supporters of Chatterji and Shapiro staged a rally at CIIS during a Board of Trustees meeting. The rally had multiple demands, including: 1) the immediate reinstatement of Professors Chatterji and Shapiro to full faculty status, 2) the immediate addressal of outstanding student grievances against the professors, but that such grievances be dealt with through the established institutional procedures, 3) the empowerment of CIIS senior faculty to constitute a body to investigate the role of the President, the AVP, and Dean of Students in the actions against the Anthropology faculty and their students and to determine appropriate disciplinary action, including termination of the named administrators.

On the day of the rally, MA student Safiya Bird-Whitten broke a 13-day fast she had undertaken in "protest of what feels like is the demonization of two professors who have helped [her] believe that [she] indeed [has] the capacity to be influential, who have challenged [her] more intellectually than [she has] ever been challenged before."

Professors Chatterji and Shapiro have received an outpouring of support from academics, community organizations, and activist networks, including Asia Human Rights Commission, Jammu Kashmir Civil Society Coalition, and from organizations like the publishing group Verso who recently released the book called *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*. Chatterji is a contributor alongside Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali.

Angana Chatterji and Richard Shapiro work with social justice issues and disenfranchised communities. Chatterji is internationally renowned for her work as co-convenor of the International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian-administered Kashmir (IPTK), and currently has sedition charges against her for her research into mass graves in the region. Shapiro, her life partner, was banned from Indian in November 2010 in connection with her work. Shapiro, also the Department Chair, is known for his anti-racist, anti-Islamophobic, and alliance building work.

For more information: www.injusticeatciis.net