About three dozen Chico State University faculty members and students gathered in the Trinity Commons area of campus last Thursday (May 10) to speak out against funding cuts to graduate programs and other issues within the CSU system.

The event was organized by the Council of Graduate Students and included representatives from the Students for a Democratic Union and other student organizations. Many of the professors in attendance wore California Faculty Association T-shirts, and a small contingent representing the Academic Student Employees Union traveled from Sacramento State University to attend the event.

COGS organized the rally in response to an announcement earlier this month that the geography master’s-degree program at Chico State would be suspended for the next two years. Other programs could also be on the chopping block this fall, said COGS event coordinator Maija Glasier-Lawson.

Cuts to graduate programs are the latest in a series of actions to offset a $750 million cut in state funding this year, with another $250 million in cuts expected in January if voters fail to approve Gov. Jerry Brown’s tax measure on the November ballot. Chico State has about 1,400 graduate students participating in 25 programs.

Though the immediate focus of the protest was graduate programs, speakers took the opportunity to address other cuts, class sizes, tuition hikes, accusations of overspending by California State University administration, and the application of a corporate model to public education. A May 8 letter from state Sen. Ted W. Lieu (D-Torrance) to CSU Chancellor Charles Reed criticizing his office’s spending of more than $750,000 on “alcohol, unnecessary meals, fancy dinners, and extravagant transportation” circulated through the crowd with a petition from COGS to save geography and other graduate programs.

“If they really cared, they’d find ways to fund classrooms, to fund faculty and to fund graduate programs,” said Kate Transchel, a professor of Soviet history at Chico State. “They manage to find ways to fund chauffeurs, presidential raises, large mansions and travel accounts.”
“And fancy dinners!” COGS member Jake Fender cried out, a phrase he would repeat throughout the protest.

“What we’re seeing is the corporate model in action,” Transchel continued, “but the university is not and should not be a business. My education is not a commodity, and neither is yours.”

Transchel said a university education is now catered toward the needs of employers and that is one reason the administration has begun cutting graduate programs.

“They don’t need programs that teach beauty, poetry and how to appreciate the quality of life,” she said.

Paul Adema, a social-sciences graduate student, said that if the school adopts the energy-conservation initiative recently passed as an advisory measure during student elections, it will save $1.3 million per year, money he suggested could be used to salvage graduate programs or meet other funding needs. The energy initiative, ironically, was developed by Adema and other students in a graduate-level geography class that no longer will be offered at Chico State.

COGS President Shane Morey recited an adaptation of Mario Savio’s 1964 “bodies upon the gears” speech. Originally delivered during the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, it likens students to products spit out by administration-run factories.

CSU political science professor Michael Coyle delivered the most enthusiastic (and enthusiastically received) speech of the afternoon; without the benefit of the bullhorn used by other speakers, he could be heard several hundred feet away and it was hard for passersby not to pay attention.

“George Orwell once said the most difficult thing that there is to see,” Coyle began, “is the very fucking thing under your nose.”

Coyle acknowledged Orwell didn’t actually drop the F-bomb, but noted “sometimes it takes a little bit of language for people to wake up.”

He suggested that students today are “witnessing the murder of the social contract for education” that’s distinguished the CSU system in past decades. He criticized the system’s administration for denying its faculty “even inflation-level pay increases” and a state that places more importance on building prisons than funding schools. He said that 95 percent of prisoners don’t have a high school diploma.

Coyle joined an impromptu “down with Reed” chant but stopped when it turned into “down with Zingg,” a shot at Chico State’s president, Paul Zingg.

“I’ve got my problems with Zingg,” he said, “but I’m not quite there yet.”

He said that while education is of obvious importance to students and educators, it’s also important to the whole of society.
“Education is what promotes in an individual the demand for civil liberties and human rights. This is not a place where you come to learn how to make gadgets or go get a sales job next year,” he said. “This is a place where you come to become a human being, to fully contemplate what your responsibilities are.”