A noontime rally to support Sen. Barack Obama drew about 50 students to the quad at UC Merced; two or three at a time turned up to support Sen. John McCain.

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MERCED -- It was a busy political day Wednesday at the University of California at Merced. At least for Democrats.

At a noontime presidential rally, about 50 supporters of Sen. Barack Obama chanted near the quad. The president of Democrats at UC Merced, Nibal Halabi, yelled into a microphone: "What do we have?"

"Hope!" supporters responded.
"What do we want?"
"Change!"
"Who's gonna get it?"
"Obama!"

Republican students at the campus of 2,718 students are having a tough time energizing their base. Two or sometimes three Sen. John McCain supporters showed up to support their candidate in a dueling rally.

Mike Fincher, the vice president of Republicans at UC Merced, strode up to the Obama crowd with homemade McCain signs in each hand.

"No!" he shouted each time before the larger group chanted "Obama."

In the afternoon, students trekked from dorm to dorm in a nonpartisan push to register students to vote.

"It went well," freshman Obama supporter Eriq Truitt said. "But the recurring theme was the people were already registered."

In another nonpartisan event, the Associated Students of UC Merced and several university departments held a presidential debate watch party at night.


Denham also noted the turnout at the event. "It is good to see all of you tonight and to see how engaged you are," he said. "It is not only good to see a Republican club on campus, but a Democratic one too."
More than 75 students attended the event, which provided free pizza so students wouldn't miss part of the debate while waiting in dinner lines at the cafeteria.

After their opening remarks, Cardoza and Denham grabbed a slice of pizza and settled in next to each other to watch the debate.

After the debate, only Obama supporters were left in the room.

Truitt said his favorite question in the debate was the last one, on the issue of education.

"That really hits home for me," he said. "Student loans are killing me right now."

Halabi was pleased that the debate included health care policy.

"It really put them out there and separated their ideas," he said. "That is where they showed strong differences."

Bryant Ziemba, the president of Republicans at UC Merced, watched the debate with friends at his home off campus.

He said the best part centered on the discussion of dirty campaigning.

"Both of them advocated a fair campaign, but it hasn't been going that way," he said.

Ziemba said he was confident Republican students were engaged, just not publicly.

"The Obama trend on college campuses has gone beyond politics," he said. "Now it involves fashion and fun and making friends."

That makes it harder for Republicans, especially freshmen trying to make friends, to make their beliefs widely known, he said. His
group will be featuring a "Coming Out Party" on campus today to tell students "It's OK to be a Republican."