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UC Faculty Senate Endorses Competition for National Labs

(May 19, 2004) At today's meeting of the University of California Board of Regents, the Academic Senate representatives announced that a poll of faculty shows overwhelming support for bidding by UC to retain management of the Lawrence Livermore National Lab and the Los Alamos National Lab. The 3,271 faculty who responded to the poll, which was conducted electronically by the Senate's Academic Council Special Committee on the National Labs, favored UC competition by a 3-1 margin, with 67% favoring a bid, 21% opposing a bid, and 13% not taking a position. Although the University has managed these labs for more than 60 years, recent legislation mandates that the Department of Energy hold a competition for the contract to manage these national laboratories, whose primary mission is the stewardship of the US nuclear weapons stockpile. Management of the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab, adjacent to the UC Berkeley campus, will also go out to bid this summer, but this laboratory, which conducts no classified research, was not considered controversial and was therefore not included in the poll.

A substantially greater number of faculty voted in this poll compared to a 1996 ballot, where 61% of the faculty favored renewal of the contract for all three labs, while 39% opposed the contract renewal. "We are extremely gratified that Senate faculty members have taken the time to inform themselves about these issues and to express their collective opinion in such substantial numbers," commented Professor Lawrence Pitts, Chair of the UC Academic Senate. An even earlier vote of the faculty, taken in 1990, had strongly opposed continued management of the labs by 36%-64% margin. Professor George Blumenthal, Chair of the laboratory special committee and Vice Chair of the UC Academic Senate added that "The UC faculty has now given a clear message to the Regents and to the Department of Energy about our desire to retain the labs within UC. Because the UC faculty provides both the research oversight and peer review so essential to a first class scientific organization, I believe that our voice will carry considerable weight."

The poll revealed that the major reasons that faculty support UC competition are: the quality and national benefits of the unclassified research, which constitutes nearly half of the laboratories' research endeavor, and the valuable research collaborations that the laboratories have with UC faculty and students. For those opposing competition, the most important reason cited was that the missions of the laboratories and that of the University of California are fundamentally incompatible. Another reason cited was concern that UC's name and reputation are devalued by the adverse publicity associated with these two national laboratories. About nine percent of the faculty favored competing for the Lawrence Livermore National Lab but not for the Los Alamos National Lab. Less than one percent favored competing only for Los Alamos.

The electronic poll also provided faculty views about several other issues related to the laboratories. Despite overwhelming support for UC to enter the competition, only 25% of the faculty either somewhat or strongly agreed that the recent undertaking to manufacture nuclear

weapons components at the Los Alamos Lab is an appropriate activity for UC to manage. Blumenthal noted that “Clearly, even those faculty supportive of the labs find weapons component manufacturing a bitter pill to swallow.” In addition, more than two-thirds of the respondents expressed the view that despite the classified nature of much of the research at the labs, the University should act to protect free and open inquiry and the right to “speak truth to power.” Senate Chair Pitts added that “UC faculty have clearly expressed the view that academic freedom and free and open inquiry are essential to the success of a national research laboratory.” The poll also showed that the faculty believes that science and technology should have the highest priority in judging the quality of the management of the labs and that faculty support more funding of research collaborations involving UC faculty and students as well as laboratory scientific personnel. Finally, the poll showed that UC Senate faculty generally did not support the idea of turning all control of business practices, security, health, and safety issues over to industrial business partners.

This poll was conducted during a two-week period by the University of California’s Academic Senate, the governing body of UC’s permanent faculty. The Standing Orders of the UC Board of Regents empower the Academic Senate to determine the University’s curricula, grading system, admissions policy, and other academic matters. The Senate also comments on other important University issues, and its two leaders, Professors Pitts and Blumenthal, also serve as faculty representatives to the Board of Regents. The Academic Council is the executive body of the Senate, and its Academic Council Special Committee on the National Labs, chaired by Professor Blumenthal, is charged with soliciting the views of faculty regarding laboratory issues and with providing timely input to the UC President on issues related to the possible competition, such as whether to compete with a partner and the terms to include in any bid. This special committee has written eleven short white papers providing background material on the national labs and had helped organize town hall meetings on several campuses prior to the poll. The white papers as well as links to videos of several laboratory discussions and the questions asked in this poll are all available on their website at <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/senate/doelabs/>. According to Pitts, the Senate will issue a more complete report on the results of this poll within about two weeks.

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