

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Susan Cochran, Chair of the Academic Senate

January 18, 2023

Thank you, Chair Leib. The faculty of the University of California began this year with the quiet hope that the worst of the last three years was behind us. Cleaning up the detritus left from the pandemic has had its opportunities—to take a second look at our ideas, to prune the loved but dead branches of our work, and then to sally forth into the great unknown on the hunt for new discoveries.

But few of us anticipated that this last fall the faculty would be called on once again to throw aside everything to sustain the academic mission. Some of us did so by creatively adjusting course plans; others by offering more support to our students, including those who were striking. And whew, we did it. We finished the term; the student employees and the University got a contract. And we thank the Regents for whatever help they lent to make this happen.

But the faculty are now exceptionally weary, as are many administrators, staff, and students. And like others whose tempers have shortened during these challenging times, we ask respectfully for a few moments from you to share some of the faculty's concerns.

The financial models of UC's PhD programs need addressing. The University has taken a first step in this direction by coming to terms with the demands of our student employees. But this cannot be the end of the conversation. Although less than 2% of Californians possess a research doctorate or PhD, in Santa Clara County, a job creation turbine, 5% of residents do. To be terse, PhD training matters to the state of California.

Let me strew a few more breadcrumbs of facts in front of you. Annually, California graduates more research doctorates than any other state in our nation. Last year, the UC graduated 63% of these new California PhDs. And it doesn't stop there. Four of our campuses are some of the largest contributors of undergraduates admitted to doctoral training across the country. We can be proud that 6% of all doctoral recipients nationally receive their undergraduate degree from the UC. This is the fruit of our labors in growing our own.

You have heard the stories—doctoral students who have their hearts set on an academic career find the academic job market exceptionally competitive, as it will always be for highly coveted spots at research universities. But this is only one planed surface of the whole. Another truth is that at the UC, more than two-thirds of our doctoral students major in the STEM fields—4 out of 5 if one uses the National Science Foundation definition. And according to NSF, 71% of STEM PhD students graduate with a guaranteed job or post-doc placement. More than two-thirds find employment in business, industry, government, or non-profit organizations. Only a quarter stay in the academic world—many of these as post-docs before they too enter the non-academic workforce.

More facts. STEM graduates earn on average higher incomes than their less educated peers, even those with master's degrees. Thus, while we have many graduate students whose needs cannot be overlooked, it is also equally true that the majority of research doctoral education UC provides is not simply to produce future professors. Instead, it is a powerful engine for economic growth. The degree is a relatively direct path of upward mobility for many of the students we train. And train them we do—successfully—while only somewhere around half of students nationwide who start a PhD program finish,

at the UC more than 70% of our students do. As well, we draw diverse students into our training programs—nearly 20% of the domestic doctoral students we graduated last year were from underrepresented minority groups, a rate greater than that seen nationally. For those who do stay in the academic world, these individuals represent the seed corn that will allow us to diversify the professoriate.

I feel compelled to state these facts—to underscore how critical research doctorate education is to the mission of the UC—because the faculty are deeply afraid for its future.

We are here in this crisis because we are a top public research university. We have always punched above our weight by hiring the best young and then turning them loose to achieve. Leaning on their initiative, we have grown undergraduate and graduate training programs at the campus departmental level. Our self-supporting degree programs also bloom out of these locations. It is a model that has worked exceptionally well for us, with relatively little cost, and one that relies on the initiative and labor of individual faculty to build centers and labs and envision a future imbued with innovation and entrepreneurship. You have seen the results of this—some of our homegrown entrepreneurs have come before you in prior meetings to share their accomplishments.

It has been the responsibility of the faculty to provide much of the financial support for our doctoral students: through our personal efforts to obtain external training and research grants, through our intensive mentoring of students writing their own first grant, and also through campuses' use of instructional funding to hire more TAs and thus fewer faculty. But this model has been struggling for years. And now many faculty fear it cannot be sustained.

The chancellors, executive vice chancellors, vice chancellors for research, and leadership from the National Labs and UC Health have heard us and are at this moment developing solutions to cover the immediate funding shortfalls that the new union contract will create. Their hope is that the faculty, given more time, can grow UC's way out of this. We appreciate the confidence, but many of us struggle to find faith in its wisdom as a long-term solution.

The president and our new provost have heard us, and have committed to working with the Academic Senate to craft more forward-thinking models to support the doctoral training mission for the long term. That work hopefully will begin soon.

But we are also asking you, the Regents, to support this common mission. These meetings have often emphasized expanding access for our undergraduates. Faculty at this moment are concerned about maintaining access for our doctoral students. If we can no longer afford to admit and support many of these individuals, we will be constraining what has been a path of upward mobility for Californians and a source of economic vitality for the state. Going forward, we need your engagement and commitment. Thank you, Chair Leib. That concludes my remarks.