

Academic Council Chair Kum-Kum Bhavnani
Remarks to the University of California Board of Regents
January 22, 2020

Thank you, Chair Pérez and Board Members.

The start of this new decade offers a hint of optimism. Of light entering our worlds.

Despite the threat of war, the impeachment of the President of the USA (which for some offers optimism), the continuing refusal to prosecute the Burma government for the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, the huge swarms of desert locusts that are threatening food security across East Africa because of climate change, and, for the UK, Brexit, and the trauma of Meg(han)-xit.

Yet, optimism remains in the air. That allure can appear foolhardy to some, and, yet, it is optimism that allows us to imagine change, to imagine creating a more just world, a world where racism, poverty, and inequality in all its guises, do not exist.

It is optimism that led up to five million women in India forming a wall 385 miles long to protest gender inequality and gendered violence. It was optimism that underlay the strikes in France to protest the introduction of reduced pension benefits, and it is optimism that shapes the rebellions against elites in Latin America, and informed the actions of Estanislao Fernández who carried a PRIDE symbol at the inauguration of his father as President of Argentina.

Student protests are often fueled by optimism, as they, in the title of the 1955 Pendle Pamphlet, “speak truth to power”, something many long to do at times, but who also know that the wisdom of doing so is best assessed in the context of the goal that is being sought. Yet optimism need not be expressed only as protest.

The UC Academic Senate, through Shared Governance with the Regents and the UC President is optimistic about how best to ensure the UC remains the premier university system in the world. To that end, we are currently exploring how to encourage degree completion by those who left the UC without a degree for want of a few credits, by developing Senate proposals that best comprehend the academic requirements to complete a degree, so that we may tempt people back into the UC to earn their final handful of units. Senate has also created a Task Force to explore how to extend faculty diversity at the UC, while simultaneously working closely with Vice Provost Carlson in Academic Personnel and Programs, based in Provost Brown’s office. Next week, Academic Council, the Executive Committee of the Systemwide Academic Senate, will, as a group, engage with ideas of implicit bias, particularly as they relate to ethnicity, ‘race’, gender, sexualities and able-bodied-ness. Senate faculty also sit side-by-side with UC health professionals to discuss how best to ensure that health benefits offered by the UC allow the UC’s lowest paid employees to have high quality and consistent health care, regardless of whether the medical-care professionals are based within the UC or not. And the final example of Senate work that I choose to mention today is a Senate-initiated Working Group on Sanctioning Guidelines, co-chaired by Chancellor Block and myself, that will offer guidelines for how to achieve consistency in sanctions for violations of UC Sexual Violence Sexual Harassment policies.

I close with an example of work being done by UC faculty that inspires optimism.

Most in this room know that the refugee crisis is getting larger around the world, as is the number of asylum seekers. At the border between the US and Mexico, the number of asylum seekers is substantial. Customs and Border Patrol are loath to give precise figures.

15 months ago, on the San Diego side of the US/Mexico border, Jewish Family Services set up a shelter, able to house approximately 150 to 200 people, to address the humanitarian crisis that was happening as a result of asylum seekers -- e.g. indigenous populations and women -- fleeing persecution and violence.

On 23rd December 2018, Dr. Linda Hill, Clinical Professor in Family Medicine and Public Health at UC San Diego was approached by a County in San Diego. She was asked if she could create a medical team to screen asylum seekers for infectious diseases – such as influenza, chicken pox, measles, TB, lice and scabies – so they could enter the shelter. The team would have 24 hours to reach every asylum seeker, conduct a screening, and make a decision regarding their health. Every adult seeking asylum had to have at least one child under 18 with them.

By 24th December 2018, a contract had been sent to the County for this work, thanks to infrastructure staff such as those who do HR, payroll, contracts, as well as UCSD administrators, all of whom came out from their holiday break to make this happen. Dr. Hill also had to identify medical professionals who were prepared to do this screening.

The medical team had to distinguish three groups: people cleared to enter the shelter, people who needed to be isolated and housed individually (due to having a non-toxic infectious disease such as influenza) until they could be cleared to be housed in the shelter, and those who needed to go to an Emergency Room. The first six months of the program, she tells me, were “absolutely chaotic”. The Department of Homeland Security were dropping off up to 250 people per day to be screened.

To date, a team of up to 170 people, working on their days off, etc. etc., have screened at least 20,000 asylum seekers, 10,000 of whom are children. Only 1% of the assessed were admitted into the ER. Linda has worked with graduate students and anthropologists to see how to develop this initiative further.

I have not met Dr. Hill, but came across her work thanks to the Chair of the Systemwide Senate Committee on Research Policy, Andrew Baird.

Commitment, passion and determination to do the best for people in a crisis situation is central to what all of us at the University of California understand as integral to our service work. Dr. Hill and 170 others epitomize one example of service proffered by UC faculty, staff, and students.

Que haya luz: fiat lux: let there be light.