

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents
Mary Gauvain, Chair of the Academic Senate

July 2021

Thank you, Chair Estolano, welcome to your chair-ship, and good morning everyone. As we enter the next phase of the pandemic, it is a good time to reflect on the last year-and-a-half. We need to discover the lessons we've learned and figure out how to use them going forward. I expect these reflections will not be easy. The pandemic changed so much of life, and it did so very quickly. It has been an unsettling time and it has endured far longer than any of us expected.

In fact, by the time the campuses re-open in the fall, UC faculty, students, and staff will have worked and studied off-site for over 17 months. During this time, the faculty, lecturers, and graduate teaching assistants have maintained their teaching and mentoring responsibilities. They have been the primary touchpoints between the undergraduate students and the University. As we know, remote instruction enabled us to meet our obligations to students, and during the pandemic, enrollment has been steady, and students have been able to advance in their programs of study.

To find out about the academic experiences at the University during the pandemic, the Senate conducted a survey of UC faculty and instructors in May of this year. We asked them about the teaching and learning environment, work conditions, and research experience. Later today at the meeting of the Academic and Student Affairs Committee, Faculty Representative Horwitz and I will present the survey results. In my remarks, I will touch on some of its main points and what it foretells about our future at the University.

The survey reveals how we met our academic mission over the last year and a half. As for teaching, the faculty, lecturers, and students, both graduate and undergraduate, did an admirable job holding it together. They are to be commended for all their work. So, the first lesson we learned is that the University continues to be strong in meeting its educational mission. Yet, the survey also tells us that other parts of the academic mission did not fare so well.

Research productivity, in particular, was hit very hard. Teaching remotely was very time consuming and required major effort and preparation. In addition, faculty were off campus and unable to work in their research and performance spaces or meet with collaborators in the type of face-to-face exchanges that foster creativity and innovation. We expect the impact of Covid-19 on faculty research will have wide-ranging effects that could last many years. It will more than likely delay the advancement of many faculty, especially our junior and women colleagues who had caregiving responsibilities during the remote instruction period. They will be discouraged about their professional careers, and faculty retention is likely to be a concern.

There will also be a collective impact, one that could threaten the decades-long efforts to expand and diversify the faculty and bring women and underrepresented faculty into leadership positions. This impact will be compounded by the lack of secure, long-range funding for the University, which impedes our ability to hire tenure-track faculty. The student-faculty ratio is already at high levels, and it will continue to rise as we enroll more students to meet agreements with the legislature. Thus, I am saddened to say, that rather than making progress in faculty development, the combined effects of the pandemic on our current faculty, expected retirements of a number of older faculty,

and the limited ability to hire new faculty as a result of state funding constraints have the University on a course that could be called a perfect storm.

For these reasons, the Academic Senate asks the Regents and the Administration to do all they can to help faculty whose research has been greatly affected by the pandemic, and also to secure resources to expand and diversify the faculty. We are pleased that the Provost, on the request of the President, has formed a joint Senate-Administration Working Group on mitigating the Covid-19 impacts on faculty. This group, which is co-chaired by Faculty Representative Horwitz and UC Davis Provost Mary Croughan, is already hard at work developing recommendations regarding faculty advancement, morale, work-life balance, and dependent care. We all know that implementing these recommendations will cost money, but it will be money well-spent to preserve the excellence of the UC faculty and maintain the high educational quality of the University.

The survey also included questions about the learning context for undergraduate students during the pandemic. Even though our students held fast in their studies, most faculty and instructors reported that students confided in them about serious personal hardships that affected their class work. Faculty and instructors were very supportive of students during this time, including being flexible and making accommodations for meeting class expectations.

When we return to campus, we expect there will be some difficulties. Notwithstanding the admirable effort of the UC in formulating a resolute vaccine mandate policy, the Senate continues to have concerns about the implementation and enforcement of it when we reopen in-person in fall. We are also concerned about the

faculty being pushed hard to be overly flexible on teaching modality, an expectation that will no doubt contribute to the burdens I described earlier on women and underrepresented faculty.

We are all aware that, come fall, it will be important to help students reestablish the social life they miss and are eager to resume. It will also be important to help them realize their academic goals. In other words, while we need to be sensitive to what the students have been through this past year, we must, at the same time, get them solidly on track academically, which is the reason they came to the University in the first place. In the years ahead, we want our students to be able to look back on this time as a period, when despite significant challenges, they rose to the occasion and succeeded.

In the next year or two, I expect we will be taking a hard look at the University and asking questions about the future of higher education. We won't be alone; this topic is on the forefront of national discussions and has been so for many years. The pandemic delayed it a bit, but it also put some aspects of higher education into sharp relief. The question before us is simple: How do we create a higher education that works for everyone?

The underlying reasons for re-examining the purposes of higher education are stark, and chief among them are a desire, an obligation, for economic and social change. Of course, institutions of higher learning are not alone here; all societal institutions must be involved. Our role at the University of California has at least two dimensions. First, we need to identify and correct anything we do that impedes social progress for our students, faculty, staff, and the University at large. Second, we must be leaders in this endeavor. The University of California is a large and preeminent

institution. As such, we have the potential to exert great influence on the future of higher education and we have the responsibility to do so.

In this work, we have some valuable tools to draw upon, and the most important one is shared governance. This process of open and transparent consultation, advising, and decision making between the Regents, Administration, and the Academic Senate is the secure foundation, the bedrock if you will, that the University of California can rely on as we chart our future course.

Finally, this is my last regents meeting and I want to thank you for your support of me and the Academic Senate over this past year, especially former Chair Pérez. It has been an honor to serve this year as faculty representative to the Board of Regents. I wish you the best in your endeavors and I leave you in good hands when come September Faculty Representative Horwitz will join you as Chair of the Academic Senate. Chair Estolano, this concludes my remarks.