



Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Steven W. Cheung, Chair of the Academic Senate

March 19, 2025

Good morning, Regents, President Drake, faculty, students, staff, and other members of the University of California community. Within the first 60 days of the new White House administration, higher education has been grappling with rapid-fire executive branch pronouncements that take direction from the pillars of The America First Agenda. The blueprint for remaking the United States is already being inked into our country's tapestry. The federal government is flexing muscular control over school curricula, reinterpreting an age-old immigration statute, rebalancing preferred energy sources, departing from longstanding approaches to international affairs, punishing perceived enemies of the state and excesses of higher education, and upsetting facets of daily life as they were known to us before November 5th. The second term of this president is being propelled by effective and disciplined disruption-minded operatives. The windstorms blowing from Washington are frequent and violent, and the University does not have a clairvoyant to navigate the turbulence.

At the recent UC Systemwide Academic Congress on Research sponsored by UCOP Academic Affairs, invited speaker Robert Conn (President Emeritus of the philanthropic Kavli Foundation and Dean Emeritus of the UCSD Jacobs School of Engineering) enunciated his clear-eyed vision for the country's next chapter. The United States is retreating to a bygone era, where size of the federal government is smaller and level of federal support for scientific research also is smaller. In dollars and cents, philanthropy cannot step in to fill the enormous billion-dollar funding

gap created by the federal pullback. That much is certain. Whether it is clairvoyant visioning or sagely reasoning, those sobering predictions, combined with newsworthy federal actions at institutions like Columbia and Johns Hopkins, foreshadow inescapable change for our University.

The forces compelling UC to reconsider the status quo are far too powerful to repulse or to sidestep, in my opinion. Some of my esteemed University colleagues disagree with this sentiment. They argue that the deployment of playbook tools and engagement of like-minded parties to oppose whirlwind change are bound to prevail. Those in this camp believe what is required is a bridge over troubled water that would land the University on familiar terrain to resume business, more or less as usual, in the not-so-distant future. This viewpoint is completely understandable and mostly irresistible, especially when embracing the centripetal vortex of the familiar is far more attractive than casting out of orbit to the unfamiliar.

Adjusting to externally imposed change is difficult, but the outcome of change may have unforeseen benefits. I am reminded of a highly impactful federal agency decision more than three decades ago that irreversibly changed the practice of medicine and the health care workforce. Medicare had adopted the use of relative value units to determine service payments. Pricing control by the federal government was a bitter pill to swallow. The apocalyptic vision of wholesale abandonment of publicly insured patients thankfully never materialized even as subsequent intrusive health service directives were implemented. Health service providers adapted to lower payments, work-life balance indivisibility tilted toward separability, service quality metrics became the norm, patient-centered practices were amplified, and vulnerable populations found better access to health care.

There will undoubtedly be more challenges to come in the weeks and months ahead. The last ding-dong of doom has hardly clanged. Amidst this backdrop of unnerving uncertainty is a clear

need for the Academic Senate and Administration, Regents, and other UC constituent groups to come together and conceive institutional response strategies for a range of scenarios in the immediate and near term. To that end, the Academic Senate will soon launch the UC Adaptation to Disruptions, or UCAD, initiative to address a number of critical institutional concerns. They center on four particular areas: 1) restructuring of academic programs; 2) resizing of programs and the work force; 3) recalibration of growth objectives; and 4) realignment of funding sources with activities. Senate deliberations will be anchored to our unwavering commitment to both the UC values of integrity, inclusion and equity, and academic freedom, and the UC mission areas in teaching and education, research and discovery, and service to society. As the University finds its footing in an increasingly challenging higher education landscape, our usual practices will be upended. The faculty will need to weigh in on what sacrifices may be required. To paraphrase President Kennedy, this is a time for UC community members to “ask not what your University can do for you, ask what you can do for your University.”