

**Academic Council Chair Kum-Kum Bhavnani**  
**Remarks to the UC Board of Regents**  
**March 18<sup>th</sup> 2020**

Thank everyone – including Michael Johnson at Luskin

Covid-19 is definitely on the mind of all of us at this meeting, as it is for many around the world.

This virus has caused much turmoil – and, as many know, has led to the shutdown of nation states, along with the “shelter in place” order for Bay Area residents, issued by Governor Newsom in California two days ago.

In these times, the University of California has become a site of greater resilience, and one that has taken on the challenge of COVID-19. The often daily meetings amongst chancellors, their administrations and the Senate campus leadership have demonstrated how working together can lead to the most robust decisions. The medical centers are working day and night, night and day, to ensure populations remain safe and that lives are extended. I know we will hear more about that in a few minutes, as Executive Vice President, Carrie Byington, brings us up to date on the work that is taking place across the university.

Undergraduate students are aware of how this disease could hurt their elders, and some are asking to stay at university dorms, rather than travel to their households, so that they may not bring danger to their elders. Graduate students are tackling some of the most difficult traumas they have experienced as they struggle to complete their research projects even as their labs and other sites of research are shutting down. And faculty have given up all idea of sleep, or even rest, at times, as forms of face to face instruction – the high quality instruction which is what makes the UC such a desirable place to study – are converted into forms of remote instruction.

In this period of emergency, and wanting undergraduate students to be able to complete their studies in as timely a way as possible, faculty are converting their lectures and discussions into remote instruction formats so that students may continue to take classes at their UC campus. Staff at teaching and learning centres, along with IT and departmental staff, to say nothing of dining hall, residence, and maintenance staff, are also working round the clock so that this remote instruction may be delivered to students. The many distinct communities and constituencies at UC campuses are working together to make sure that students’ time to degree, their desire to move into full time employment, and other wishes that accompany students’ learning are not totally derailed by something that cannot even be seen by the naked eye. It is this virus that has allowed us to see even more clearly deep the commitment of those who work at the University of California.

Another way to think about this is to consider that this disease is allowing us to see the value of truth. Truth is central as we learn how important it is to know the numbers of those who are

affected, or who have died, so that we may better understand this pandemic. The numbers are critical, so that we may grasp better how to flatten the epidemic curve: how to understand the virulence of its spread so that we may work out solutions that could slow it down and, ultimately, stop it. Truth is also important because we must acknowledge that we are afraid – not fear as in racist fears, or misogyny, or xenophobia, but fear because this disease disrespects all political boundaries and viewpoints: it does not seem to matter if I am a Trump supporter or a Bernie Sanders supporter – it could grab me either way. And perhaps it will.

Truth is what universities are good at. Truth sometimes emerges through making unexpected connections, which is what researchers do. As we conduct our research, and train others to conduct research – indeed, that is often an indicator of a good undergraduate campus: being taught by faculty and graduate students how to do research – and we know that it is truth that underlies the best research. Research is not about saying what people would want you to say, but saying what is. Regent Estolano, when she visited the Senate’s Academic Council last month, said, and I am paraphrasing horribly I know(!), that it is the truth tellers who are central to a university.

Truth is the allure of universities. Being able to speak the truth, even when it is not a popular truth (e.g. incarceration of people of colour: Million Dollar Hoods – which demonstrates the small number of neighborhoods where the LA Sheriff and Police Departments spent the most on incarceration between 2010-2015 – is, for example, a project led by Professor Kelly Lytle Hernandez – an historian at UCLA who is also based in the Department of African American Studies, who also works with Marques Vestal, a doctoral student in the Department of History and the Undercommons at UCLA) ensures that universities endure. And where better to find it than in the work of researchers, and graduate researchers.

With Cesar Chavez day approaching, the work of Neama Alamri at UC Merced seems good to learn about. In her research, Alamri uncovers the activism of Yemeni farmworkers in the United Farm Workers union during the 1970s in the Central Valley. She does through archival research and an oral history with her father, who was an immigrant – an economic refugee – when he came to the USA, ending up eventually in California’s Central valley after a brief sojourn in the car factories near Detroit, Michigan. He joined thousands of Yemeni workers, most of whom were working class, and Arab, and Muslim. This set of categorizations meant that they were racialized simultaneously as non-white and ‘other.’ The low wages and outsider (immigrant, Muslim) status, along with some of the Yemeni workers having been anti-colonial and social justice activists, led to their being attracted to the UFW. In turn, the union provided translation services, halal food, and access to health care. Yemeni workers were critical to the union’s reputation for multicultural social justice: Yemeni, Filipino and Mexican workers stood side by side together at rallies and protests.

Yemeni farmworkers active in the UFW in the 1970s. Who knew?! Yet I would not be a truth teller if I were to leave the story at that. It is all more complicated and messy – I offer this all too brief summary to tempt you to look up her work.

Complicated and messy...and, yet, the work of Neama Alamri offers hope. I invite you to read it. <https://boomcalifornia.com/2020/02/18/yemeni-farm-workers-and-the-politics-of-arab-nationalism-in-the-ufw/>

In the same way, the work of Dalena Ngo, also at UC Merced, offers us hope as she works on her insights into Narrative Medicine. Narrative Medicine draws on the humanities, sciences and the arts to combine radical listening, creativity and narrative skills. It allows caregivers and patients to speak their experiences, so that they may be heard and recognized. It has been used as a model for empathy in medicine. In her timely research, Dalena Ngo – who plans to write about COVID-19 – analyzes, through an examination of ‘race’, gender and class, how Narrative Medicine, despite its intuitive appeal, may not achieve all that it claims, given the economic and political context in which it is practiced.

Narrative Medicine, United Farmworkers Union – these are both exemplars of research pursued at the UC today, work that seeks truth. Research that makes unexpected connections.

The presence of COVID-19 might allow us to make unexpected connections and uncover truths that have been in hiding for far too long. And the University of California is critical to this work.

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