

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Mary Gauvain, Chair of the Academic Senate

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Thank you, Chair Perez, and good morning everyone. When I became Senate Vice Chair, a longtime colleague from UC Riverside, who is also a respected former Chair of the Academic Senate, asked me the following question: What do we mean when we talk about the quality of a UC education? Today, I will try to answer this question and I will use the metaphor of a three-legged stool.

One leg is transmission. All education is about transmission in one form or another. At UC, like most places of higher learning, we transmit disciplinary knowledge in a wide range of fields. This includes core concepts, the skills and tools used to develop this knowledge, and the types of problems worked on. As active researchers, UC faculty also model how knowledge is created and, with our undergraduate and graduate students, we work on authentic research projects.

In other words, our students learn about and begin to practice their chosen field of study in a setting that is saturated with research and the asking of foundational questions. This occurs in the classroom, in research groups, labs, and performance spaces, and in myriad conversations in offices, hallways, and other gathering places on campus. The discussions are not just about what is known, they include how the knowledge was acquired, analyses and critiques of it, and ideas about how to explore it further. It is here that methods of inquiry, what we might call tools of the trade such as investigation,

experimentation, and critical analysis are especially important. These tools help take knowledge to the next step.

Learning foundational knowledge, and the research tools that advance it, takes time and much study and practice. As we all know, practice is most effective when it occurs on the job, in its context of use. This is the reason why most of our undergraduates are involved in research at some point during their time on campus. Here students actively engage in the process of creating knowledge, which is enriched when participants are at various stages in their learning. New eyes can bring new ways of seeing. Formulating a question and explaining what one knows allows people to share ideas and get feedback, and it can also lead to insight and innovation, crucial stepping stones in advancing knowledge.

This approach to learning may sound familiar. It is based on the apprenticeship model, a very effective method in which less experienced individuals learn something alongside someone who is more experienced. At the UC, we have endeavored to scale up this approach tremendously, which is quite difficult to do. And its success relies on a delicate balance of resources and capacity; which is why student-faculty ratios are so important. As we know from the IRAP data, this ratio has been on a steady increase in recent years, and it does not favor student learning.

You might also notice in the description that our missions of teaching and research are inseparable. This is because we are a teaching and learning institution and our students are steeped in examining and creating knowledge in every class and in all their academic activities outside the classroom.

This brings us to another leg of the stool, which I call transformation. The experiences that students have at the UC transform them from a receiver of knowledge to someone who can use knowledge to solve problems. It is for this reason that our graduates are sought throughout the state and beyond for graduate and professional programs and for many and varied occupations, especially those that rely on the creative and flexible use of knowledge.

This ability is necessary to address many of the difficult problems before us. For instance, to change our society to be just and inclusive, we need to create new solutions to longstanding problems. In the COVID pandemic, we needed to adapt known solutions to a new problem, a highly contagious virus. Research skills also give us the ability to identify problems we didn't know we have and suggest ways to solve them, as we see in work on the climate crisis. All of these topics are being studied by UC faculty and our students. As you can see, the in-person nature of the UC education is an essential part of what we do. Students learn not just in the classroom and labs, but also in the social spaces of dorms, coffee houses, special lecture events, and discussions. What we have learned over the last year of remote instruction is that online pedagogy has some benefits, but it is a pale and inadequate version of a quality education.

So, what is the third leg of the stool? Confidence. In order to work on and solve hard problems, a person has to have confidence in themselves. Confidence born of first-hand experience in formal and informal settings over a long period of time is a powerful thing. As UC students advance in their studies, they master complex material, engage in collaborative research with faculty and graduate students, and help their peers who are learning the material for the first time. These experiences build self-confidence because students can

see for themselves all they have accomplished in their studies and how they can use it to move forward in their lives and careers.

The metaphor of a three-legged stool is particularly apt here. A three-legged stool is more stable than one with four legs when a surface is uneven – which is exactly where we find ourselves today. We are now a year into what we hope will be a once-in-a-century pandemic. It has exacted a heavy toll on everyone. Soon, we will stop counting the days since it began and begin counting the days until we are together again.

Our meetings with faculty, students, and staff indicate that we are eager to return to campus. Yet, like others, we are apprehensive and have many legitimate concerns. What will the campus be like? What shape will our work and studies take? Will we be safe? Right now, there is much planning for the return to campus in fall. It is essential that representatives of the faculty, students, and staff are involved in this planning. After all, we are the principal occupiers of the spaces that make up the campuses. As such, we can best imagine what day-to-day life on campus may be like come fall.

Beyond the fall, many forces will exert pressure on the university to change. As we go about making changes, it is important to understand what we do on our campuses and why we value it, as I have tried to do today. We all know that some things will change. Change is a natural part of any lifecycle, including that of institutions. Change helps us adapt and survive. The trick for us will be how to change without losing our core values and their manifestations in the work we do. At the present time, I believe we could all benefit from taking stock of what we have and what we hope to have in the university going forward. Perhaps by doing so we can avoid Joni Mitchell's lament when she wrote, "you don't know what you've got till it's gone."

One last thing. When I was writing these remarks, I had some trepidation. I worried that describing what we do at the UC would evoke comparison across California's three segments of higher education. Comparative or competitive thinking comes easy to us. In our society, we are trained from early on, both in- and outside of school, to be competitive. Yes, competition has its place, but it is not always helpful. So I ask you to give your competitive thinking a rest for a moment, for the following reason.

California has a remarkable system of public higher education. It is made up of three separate and excellent institutions. I have no doubt that the Academic leaders of our sister institutions, the California Community Colleges and the California State University, could or have already written descriptions of their own respective missions and how they are realized on their campuses. If we were to look across these three descriptions, we would find that each is a coherent, comprehensive, and impressive account of what each institution does and why. We would also see that the descriptions are different, and they must be so. Our purposes differ and, accordingly, so does the work we do. But more importantly, we would find that none is better than the other. Rather, their differences complement each another, and each in its own way has great value for the state and its people. This, I believe, is the trust the California public has placed in its three institutions of higher learning – that we each carry out our missions in the very best way we can. The future of California depends on it. Chair Perez, this concludes my remarks.