

Academic Senate Chair Kum-Kum Bhavnani
Remarks to the University of California Board of Regents
May 20, 2020

In California, we are now well into our 2nd month of shelter-in-place. The difficulties of not being able to leave our place of shelter, if we have one, have receded as we grapple with what is to come next. No more desperate searches for hand sanitizer or Clorox wipes, no more worrying about how we might survive without seeing loved ones who do not live with us. Instead, we edge further into the center: we now tackle how to make the best of being with our loved ones through FaceTime, Zoom, -- Regents meetings do not count as being with our loved ones! -- and even the telephone. We write letters to those who are especially precious to us. We attend funerals through the Facebook kindness of a cousin who holds up their phone so we may follow the service. We use Zoom to say farewell to someone very dear -- and we watch their cremation in the same way, just to have a glimpse into how our families are somehow coping with the compounded sadnesses with which we must all deal. The loneliness of not seeing people in 3 dimensions who live outside our household was impossible to comprehend in mid-March -- and we seem, now, to be taking it all in our stride. We, of course, do not yet know what might be the ensuing trauma of social and physical isolation -- but we can hazard a few guesses. It is not a happy thought.

Somehow, we continue. The work of a research university proceeds -- and Chair Pérez has referred to how the UC is working to eliminate the corona virus. Thank you. Teaching-wise -- faculty and students have worked incredibly hard to ensure the UC can offer high quality education in this swift transition to remote instruction. But what is next?

How do we manage the risk of dealing with the coronavirus -- a risk that is not mitigated, but to be managed -- through testing: do we plump for specificity of testing or sensitivity of testing? Nasal swabs or sputum? How do we model re-opening of research, re-population of campuses? Two students in one dorm room or just one student? Should we first bring back to campuses those whose living conditions are not good or safe? These questions, and so many more, trouble many of us as we try to work out what might be best for the many distinct constituencies within the university of California. And we do not forget that love and humor are always present as we reach out to those who have very hard lives -- including those who live outside the USA.

We also think about the future: the Academic Senate knows the UC has a major responsibility to do our duty protect the planet, and we have created a Climate Crisis Task Force to do just that, following the Senate Memorial that was submitted to the Regents last September. We also think about the future students who will enter the University of California. Will graduate students want to do research and teach? Undergraduate students: how will they enter the university? What admissions policies will they navigate as they seek the four year research education that is the hallmark of the UC.

At the UC, admissions policies have been formally delegated by the Board of Regents to the Academic Senate. This was initiated in the 1880s, with the idea that instead of having to micro-

manage university affairs, the Board of Regents could operate as a policy-making Board. To this end, the Academic Senate – faculty who work closely with students at all levels and know well what how students entering the UC could be best college prepared – has a delegated duty to guide the admissions process, and to advise the Board of Regents on matters of policy. Similarly, the Board of Regents has the responsibility to seek the Senate’s input, through the President, before making a decision. It is this three-way process of decision-making – the Senate, the Regents, the UC President – that underpins shared governance at the University of California. And it is shared governance that ensure the University remains unified in times such as these.

Tomorrow, we will jointly discuss the recommendations of the 2019 Senate Standardized Testing Task Force. Its 250 page report, available just about one year after the Task Force’s first meeting, has offered some key insights into standardized testing as it is used at the UC. In the past three decades, the Senate has become more sensitive to public concerns and assumptions that standardized tests are intrinsically discriminatory and advantage higher income students.

The unexpected outcome of the statistical analyses in the Report is that the way in which the UC draws on test scores – in the context of the 14 elements that make up UC’s holistic review for admissions – suggests that, because each applicant’s test scores are viewed within the applicant’s local context, they offer a means for protecting the diversity of the applicant pool. This counter-intuitive finding demonstrates not only that our University is not doing as badly as is often thought, but, that the thoughtful way in which UC admissions policies draw on test scores affords greater diversity than might be expected. Of course the UC could do better in terms of diversity, at all levels – no-one disputes that – but to have rigorous evidentiary data that informs how UC admissions is tackling the issues of diversity at UC campuses is helpful.

That is why the Assembly of the Academic Senate, the legislative body of the Senate, passed a motion *“to endorse the STTF report, with the recommendation that in five years the University revisit whether the added value of the SAT/ACT still holds, employing the methods used in the STTF report.”* The Assembly vote was 51-0 with one abstention.

A panel drawn from members of the STTF will discuss the findings in more detail tomorrow. I have provided a preview of our discussion, to tempt you into reminding yourself of the Report and its recommendations. Tomorrow’s panels promise to be enlightening for all who are present at the discussions.

In the past two months the Senate has tackled matters arising from the coronavirus crisis. These include, for example, Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) suggestions for temporary modifications in admissions policies during this period of crisis, suggestions embraced by the President and the Board. Divisional Chair and other Senate members are often closely involved on each of the ten UC campuses and differing groups collaborate in how to ensure that the remit of the university continues: e.g. that research work is revived – the new Vice President for Research and Innovation, Theresa Maldonado, has been coordinating these efforts since joining the University in early March; that graduate students and post-docs, alongside their PIs, ensure that the research work of the university – the heart of California’s growth engine – does

not wither. It would be remiss of me not to mention the eye-opening and often startlingly original work being conducted by UC researchers on how best to manage and mitigate the dangers of Covid-19. This involves engineers speaking with epidemiologists, speaking with sociologists, speaking with statisticians, speaking with those create “science fiction” narratives... well, you get the point. The joy of collaboration – not in a hierarchical or arrogant manner, but with a true desire to do the best we can for all who suffer from the impact of this frightening virus – underpins the very essence of shared governance. Shared governance is the stabilizing force for the ten campuses that make the University of California one system: in fact, it is our hallmark.

Que haya luz.

Fiat Lux.