

**Remarks to the UC Board of Regents**

Susan Cochran, Chair of the Academic Senate

May 17, 2023

Thank you, Chair Leib, and a very good morning to everyone. On May 5<sup>th</sup> the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 no longer constitutes a worldwide pandemic. In doing so, WHO acknowledged that the pandemic is *over*, though in the United States Covid is still the 4<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death, exceeded only by heart disease, cancer, and accidents.

This spring, with both the pandemic and the labor disruptions for the most part behind us, we can now sort through the detritus of its wake and grapple with more existential questions such as *who* are we now after this experience? *What* have we learned from all this? And *where* are we going?

*Who are we now?* We are not the same as we were before the pandemic. Many of us sense this intuitively, but our colleagues at USC have actually quantified a possible basis for this perception in a recent study. Our personality traits—the so-called big 5 of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—typically change quite slowly over our lifetimes. But the pandemic apparently sped up this process by a full decade of normative change. And who was most affected? No surprise—younger adults, the students in our classrooms and our research labs. On average they now score lower on the dimensions of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness than they did before the pandemic. All these are characteristics that they will need in abundance for their future roles as leaders of *their* generation.

Fortunately, one can see on the campuses that the healing process here has begun—many students are enthusiastic participants in experiences that will eventually remediate these pandemic-generated deficits. They are coming to class, joining student clubs, learning the importance of meeting deadlines, and finding their way through the interactive scrum of human engagement.

Across the country, we can also see these effects. Social expectations and values seem in flux. To be honest, I always thought that my generation would be the last generation of women who would have to undergo illegal abortions. Clearly, I may have been wrong.

*And what have we learned from our pandemic experiences?* The intensity and isolation of three years apart from all but our closest kin have led many to sort through the wheat and chaff of how our lives are organized. People recentered their own agency and emerged demanding flexibility in their workplaces.

On the campuses, students, too, want more options—to go to class or to watch a video of it later, whatever works for them individually. Administrators and staff also want options—to get fully dressed and make the commute or to work from home.

These individual choices have costs. For example, flexibility in the classroom—offering multiple modalities, loosening submission deadlines, writing multiple versions of tests—all represent real labor for the faculty—indeed some estimate they are devoting twice as much time to the teaching aspects of their jobs as they did pre-pandemic. And this, needless to say, has a real and deleterious impact on the amount and quality of basic, applied, and translational research that faculty can get done. Staff shortages, especially of student-facing staff, translate into work that either doesn't get done or is shifted to those who happen to be around to pick up the slack.

*This new model of individualized education is not sustainable without additional investment in the University's core mission.* In this meeting, you will hear many calls for greater investments in compliance positions and likely these will be created. But faculty and student-facing staff positions, too, are filled far below University targets reflecting choices that have been made.

As I shared in prior meetings, faculty's responsibilities extend far beyond what people can see of us in the classroom every week. We also spend substantial time exploring and expanding the frontiers of knowledge and scholarship. Many of us bring external funding to the campus providing critical financial support for students, staff, and administrators. Some of us treat patients within UC Health. We spend hours mentoring new scholars. As well, we furnish extensive service to the University and the world around us. The breadth of these activities are the full measure of our responsibilities as faculty at the top public research university system likely in the world.

With the new demands from undergraduate instruction, our workload has ballooned, as is also the case for some staff and administrators. However, this year, like last year, many faculty received a smaller cost-of-living adjustment to their total salaries than these same policy-covered staff and administrators. Don't get me wrong; we are profoundly grateful for the opportunities that come our way, but to paraphrase Otis Redding: "the faculty, they do get wearied."

Hence a last question: *Where is the UC going?* While we have yet to fully grasp all the ways in which the pandemic experience will alter the UC landscape, there are some hints we can see emerging. Let me speak briefly about two of these.

First, a robust model of hybrid undergraduate instruction is being embraced by our students who generally take a combination of in-person and online courses. By doing so they overcome the limitations of both modalities. Trust our students to try to optimize what is best for them—these are the sort of future leaders we love to welcome to our campus community.

How wise are they to do so? A study from our economist colleagues at the Federal Reserve Bank, the University of Iowa, and Harvard University, recently observed that physical proximity leads to better performance and less turnover among workers because nearby employees are much more likely to provide extensive and higher-quality help on demand. Those who benefitted most from this were younger, less experienced workers, and females within the male-dominated industry that was studied. Similarly, here in this room, regents, chancellors, and senior managers benefit from the many ad hoc conversations that move along the business of the University with ease.

Second, while faculty are exceptionally relieved that UCOP and campus administrations have stepped in this year with some one-time emergency funding for the unanticipated increases in instructional and research costs, faculty are nevertheless deeply worried for the future. Few of us ever leave money on the table, a seventh deadly sin Chair Leib is known to abhor. If we did, to be frank, we would be unlikely to hold our current positions. But the existing faculty cohort, especially those early in their careers, may not have the reserve capacity necessary to grow our way naturally out of this deficit. To that end, Provost Newman and the Academic Senate have joined together to create a systemwide workgroup that will develop recommendations for modernizing our approaches to academic graduate training. We have asked the workgroup to report back their preliminary recommendations in the fall which we then will share with you.

Thank you, Chair Leib. That concludes my remarks.