

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Susan Cochran, Chair of the Academic Senate

November 16, 2022

Thank you, Chair Leib and members of the Board. As Chair Leib just shared this is the time of year when high school and transfer students everywhere are finishing up their 4-year college applications, many hoping to secure a place in the freshman or transfer class of a University of California campus. And while colleges and universities across the country are having trouble filling their entering classes, this fortunately is not the case for us. For a panoply of reasons, we are attractive to many of these applicants—first among these is our reputation as a premier, but accessible and relatively affordable, public research institution.

At many of the recent meetings of this board the focus has been, rightfully so, on questions of access—how can we welcome more students from across California, as well as others from around the world, to one of our state’s most precious resources? Today, however, I would like to speak to a key driver of our success: our enthusiastic pursuit and embodiment of excellence in research and creative scholarship. This is what many of our applicants want to be a part of. And for our best students, this is why they choose us, despite other admission offers.

As underscored by the National Research Council, “Research universities have the primary goal of generating knowledge and dispersing it through the nation’s most talented people.” To achieve this goal, UC scholars pursue discoveries wherever they may lead, and rarely does this follow a linear path. Instead, the world of research and creative scholarship is multilayered. It contains miles and miles of rehashed and modest findings as well as enticing dead ends pockmarked by pits of failed ideas. Only occasionally does one stumble across a wellspring of novel insights. And even then, this is rarely enough to quell one’s thirst.

This is a landscape that few of us in the academy explore alone. Cutting-edge scholarship is more likely to occur where there is high density of stellar and diverse colleagues creating synergistic friction across a broad range of disciplines. On each of our campuses, in each of our labs, repositories, and research hubs, faculty, academic researchers, and trainees interact. They cross-fertilize ideas, absorb new methods and approaches, and find humor in the many, many frustrations that are the hallmark of discovery. Research and creative scholarship take a very large, interconnected, and, yes, expensive social and physical infrastructure to support it. The good that derives from this is well documented. But as we will share with the Academic and Student Affairs Committee later in this meeting, faculty’s sense of community, of institutional support for the research mission, and of access to key resources for their own research success is where UC faculty report the greatest pandemic-related damage. With the current labor issues buffeting the campuses, faculty are again facing similar challenges—how can they fulfill their research, teaching, and mentorship obligations perturbed in this instance by student labor demands, many of which they might have sympathy for.

More than 80% of our undergraduates want to be involved in faculty-led research. Those who come to us arrive down many paths: through programs run by undergraduate support services that match students’ interests to professors’, by cold calling on their professors via hopeful emails, and from connections faculty and students make in classrooms. Sometimes we might observe a student in a class who isn’t a right fit for what we ourselves are doing but we know someone they should meet or some

door they should knock on. In those cases, we also make the introduction. And once students join in with our great adventure, they, too, learn that much of ‘doing research’ is grunt work, punctuated by rare, but addicting, aha moments. Like us, they learn to binge on new ideas, to be patient, to manage failure, and to be persistent because most innovation is born of trial and error.

In our classrooms, undergraduates also benefit from learning in the fast-paced environment of a major research university. Although 14th-century art is what it is whether studied at a UC or a primarily teaching university—or similarly, in my own field, the formula for a standard deviation is the same whether taught in high school, on YouTube, or in a UC classroom, I submit there is a difference in how these facts are woven into instruction. Classroom examples often come from our own yet to be published studies. And there is likely a faster pace of updating courses as professors take advantage of the observation by Roman philosopher Seneca: “While we teach, we learn.” Classrooms are used to test out nascent research ideas exposing students to the process of discovery. At the Academic and Student Affairs Committee session, you will also hear a presentation on the ways in which research is infused symbiotically into our academic efforts. This is one of the distinctive strengths of the UC—much of our success is driven by front line engagements of research faculty in the development of new lectures, classes, programs, and majors.

An additional linchpin to excellence is our exceptionally rigorous step and rank faculty review system, unique among universities. Every two or three years, faculty are evaluated extensively for their achievements. During the course of a UC career there are also three significant barrier steps, instead of the usual one as seen at other universities. Advancement beyond these three barrier steps is not assured. Most, in fact, never achieve all three. The insistent pressure for achievement—especially in research or creative activities and teaching—allows little time for slacking off despite a widespread stereotype of faculty that’s to the contrary. Hence, as we will report from the Academic Senate’s annual survey, faculty last spring were overwhelmed with the pandemic-inflated instructional workload. Most lamented that they had not met their responsibilities for research productivity. With rapidly approaching post-pandemic personnel reviews they may fear they will not have enough of the required evidence of a “productive and creative mind” needed for merit or promotion. For this reason, the Provost and the Senate have advised the campuses to consider faculty’s achievements since the start of the pandemic using a new Achievement Relative to Opportunities, or ARO, standard.

But what you will probably not hear about at this meeting, unless you ask, are whether as we commit to greater access for students, we are similarly committing to proportionate growth of research faculty. These are the catalyst of innovation and entrepreneurship on the campuses, and according to our applicants a critical reason for why they choose the UC for their education.

In sum, every university swears that it is committed to excellence. This is easy to state but much more difficult to measure than our markers of student access and graduation rates. We do have some solid indicators: our success in attracting and graduating top students, our research achievements, and our rankings certainly. And saying so doesn’t mean we cannot improve. Indeed, our faculty is exceptionally motivated to do better, to be better, and to achieve. In deference to one of the two challenges of this meeting, let me finish by quoting from the great coach Vince Lombardi on the topic of excellence: “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.” This is the ultimate goal of our faculty. Chair Leib, this concludes my remarks.