UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA Academic Senate

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents
Susannah Scott, Chair of the Academic Senate

UC Leadership in the AI Era
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Thank you, Chair Anguiano, and good morning, Regents, President Milliken, faculty, staff, students, and all members of the University of California community.

A priority this year, both for the Board and for President Milliken, is UC leadership in the era of artificial intelligence. This is timely, and entirely appropriate. There are few topics that UC faculty are more interested in, or more anxious about. Will AI create more jobs than it destroys? Will it supercharge climate change, before it contributes to finding solutions? Will it democratize expertise, or will it generate even more pervasive inequities? While we continue to debate, our humanities faculty have alerted us that the implications of AI for higher education are profound, touching on academic freedom, intellectual property, data privacy, and the educational mission itself. AI was the focus of a recent Senate workgroup led by one of my predecessors, Professor Jim Steintrager of UC Irvine. His report describes not just technical issues, but the key value judgements they entail. I think it's fair to say that many of the workgroup's concerns are shared by our staff, our students, and the public generally.

With a technology as disruptive as AI, the *pace* of change is a challenge. Unexpected benefits—and risks—come into focus only when change is already well underway. In the realm of higher education, several technologies have failed to live up to their promise. Think of the short-lived experiment with Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, in the 2010s. A decade later, the global pandemic forced us to participate in another online educational experiment. It ended up convincing us just how much human interaction matters to our students, and to their learning. Technologies like social media that we were told would connect us have triggered epidemics of loneliness and social anxiety instead. Today, when

more than half of US states have policies restricting mobile phone use in K12 schools, a new study of outcomes reports more student engagement and improved test scores.

AI is not a technology focused narrowly on education, of course. Industry leaders claim it will change everything, but most of all, how we work. Of special interest to faculty work is the impact of AI on research. UC is a place where knowledge generation and innovation is not only possible but expected. As more researchers worldwide seek breakthroughs, the amount of new data is rising exponentially. AI is accelerating this trend. It is not an understatement to say that researchers are struggling to deal with the flood of information—it has become impossible for us to stay abreast of new developments.

Just in time, AI can now summarize vast amounts of information for us. This ability makes AI an essential tool but also a serious threat, because it does not yet distinguish high- and low-quality research results—and of the latter, there is far too much. Large Language Models weigh the value of scientific assertions by their frequency—but frequency is not the same as rigor, or accuracy. And, as more researchers use AI to write about their work, our scholarly journals are being inundated with submissions filled with so-called "AI slop." A recent study of 2.5 million papers published in biomedical journals since mid-2024 found the frequency of fabricated citations had increased 1,300% in just 18 months. This alarming observation coincides with the proliferation of AI tools and their hallucinated references.

Faculty know the value of research is rarely in the answers it generates. Instead, it's in the questions we choose to ask - how we frame them, and where they lead us. The journey is not just important; it is often the real point. Letting an algorithm choose questions for us and provide us with answers may make us faster, but does not necessarily enhance our understanding. "AI-first" shortcuts may increase research productivity, but will they also cause users to gradually relinquish their skill at reasoning, and at thinking creatively? Faculty believe these abilities are at the core of our intellectual autonomy, which we cannot surrender to any technology - no matter how powerful.

AI is also transforming what it means to learn, and redefining the skills our students need to succeed. What we don't know is whether or how its use will

undermine the intellectual development of students who are still figuring out *how* to think critically, to pose probing questions, and to challenge accepted paradigms. By reducing the need and the opportunity to acquire these skills, AI will make it much harder for them to become rigorous thinkers. This concern is at the root of faculty caution regarding the broad adoption of AI in higher education.

For the Academic Senate, leadership in the era of AI means engaging thoughtfully, applying ethical principles, and making responsible choices, while transmitting these values to the next generation of scholars and leaders. Within our established processes of shared governance, we can draw on the perspectives of UC faculty experts from a broad cross-section of disciplines. As we ask ourselves, and each other: what can AI do for us? what role could it play in the UC of the future? and how will we use its potential to enhance our mission? we will need to use all our expertise, imagination, and humility to find the answers.

We would also do well to recall the words of a pre-AI-era philosopher 孔夫子 (Kǒng fūzǐ), better known in the West as Confucius. Over 2,500 years ago, he advised: “欲速则不达" (Yù sù zé bù dá). It means: “When it’s urgent, take your time”.

Chair Anguiano, this concludes my remarks.

Susannah Scott
Chair, Academic Senate