

Remarks to the Regents
September 15, 2020
Mary Gauvain, Chair, UC Academic Senate

Thank you, Chair Pérez and good morning everyone. I am happy to be joining you today as Chair of the Academic Senate and a Faculty Representative to the Board of Regents. The other Faculty Representative is the Vice Chair of the Academic Senate, Professor Robert Horwitz, who I am pleased to introduce to you. Dr. Horwitz is a sociologist in the Department of Communication at UC San Diego, where he has been on the faculty since 1982. He is a respected scholar in the study of democracy and political reform. He has studied regulatory reform in a large organization undergoing deregulation. He was invited by the African National Congress to study the post-apartheid reform process in South Africa. His recent research focuses on the rise of conservatism over the last half century in the United States. Dr. Horwitz has long standing engagement with the Academic Senate on his campus and systemwide, and he has served in an administrative capacity as department chair on several occasions. I am sure that you join with me in welcoming Dr. Horwitz. We look forward to working with you over the coming year. And we extend a warm welcome to President Drake, and we also look forward to working with you.

This is the beginning of another academic year, a time that is usually filled with excitement on the campuses and much positive energy. But, sadly, this is not the case this year. These are not usual times. On March 11, a little more than six months ago, the first stay at home orders were issued in the San Francisco Bay area and in many counties throughout the state. Most of us, save some epidemiologists, were shocked when it happened. We had not encountered such a situation in our lifetime and there was, at first, much curiosity and activity as we tried to understand it all and figure out what to do. What we did to live and learn in the early days of the pandemic gave us direction and a sense of control, which helped us cope.

But now, after these many months and no clear end in sight, a more chronic state of stress has set in, and our bodies and minds are not well equipped to deal with the ongoing anxiety, uncertainty, and worry it entails. Our resources and energy are drained, and the toll is evident among our faculty, students, and staff. In addition to genuine worry about

their physical health, the ongoing personal, social, and economic difficulties they face are affecting their mental health and well-being. Many experts predict that mental health concerns will continue and even increase as time goes on. Some are referring to this process as the pandemic echo. We need to keep a close watch on it as we move through the fall term.

Our faculty, students, and staff are to be commended for their actions in the spring when they shifted quickly and effectively to remote instruction. But now it is fall, and we didn't really expect to still be here. Although most courses will be taught remotely as was done in spring, we must not underestimate how difficult this situation is on the ground. Technology is fantastic, except when it isn't. Problems in teaching, advising, and testing will undoubtedly occur, we just don't know the extent or severity yet. And at the same time, our faculty, students, and staff are trying to cope with their own lives, professional and personal. We will all hear more about this over the year, and I mention it now, not because you aren't aware of it. You, too, are worried about these issues, as well as moving yourself and your loved ones safely through these days of days. My point is that, in our roles here, we must remember the great difficulty the pandemic presents to the people who work and learn at the University of California, people who have entrusted their livelihoods and future to us.

The year will be difficult for the institution in two other major ways. We live in an unsettling time for individuals, society, and the planet itself. We must do all we can to identify and correct any practices that contribute to systemic racism at the university. One way to do this, which we plan to do in the Academic Senate, is to stop and think at every decision point about why we do something the way we do, and whether our actions contribute to or enable inequities to occur. If we think they do, then we need to do something about it. Doing this in one instance may seem inconsequential, but if we all do it and we do it consistently, it could lead to powerful and positive changes in the university. It is also a way of putting responsibility for addressing systemic racism in our own hands. In order to combat this societal injustice, we all need to be agents of change.

A second difficulty before us is the climate crisis. In fact, many world leaders have said that the havoc wrought by the pandemic is simply a warm-up for the environmental devastation and social disruption that the climate crisis will bring if drastic changes do not

happen soon. Of course, the climate crisis is not separate from the pandemic. Both stem from disregard for and abuse of the environment, behaviors that are hard to fathom. As the primatologist Jane Goodall recently said, and I quote “Bizarre, isn’t it, that the most intellectual creature — surely, that’s ever lived on the planet — is destroying its only home. I always believe it’s because there’s a disconnect between that clever, clever brain and the human heart, love and compassion. I truly believe, only when head and heart work in harmony can we attain our true human potential.” (end of quote)

The Academic Senate will be committing much of its effort this year to figuring out how to use the vast resources and expertise of the university to address the climate crisis, both on our campuses and beyond. Our work will be guided by the Green New Deal developed by faculty at UC San Diego and it will be led by Vice Chair Horwitz who has been involved with the effort on his campus. We will not be creating a task force to do this work because a task force focuses on a single defined task or activity. The climate crisis is not a singular issue, it is the condition of life today – one that threatens our very existence. As such, we need to think about it from every angle possible including our teaching, research, campus environments, finances and budget, and, importantly, environmental justice.

Moreover, this crisis will not be solved by individuals working in a single or small set of disciplines. Scientists in the STEM fields are, of course, vital to this work, and UC has many researchers working on clean energy development, environmental conservation and replenishment, and the protection and preservation of natural resources. Social and health scientists will help us understand and track the social and demographic changes underway, they will also devise and deliver health care practices and closely monitor health trends. Behavioral scientists will help us understand human thought processes and actions that contribute to the crisis and identify corrective changes that are needed and how we might get there. Artists, writers, and humanists will guide us every step of the way as they put into words, images, and performances the current state of the planet as well as where we might be in the future.

We believe the University of California can and must play a leadership role in climate issues, and that this effort will enrich our community and inspire those outside the system who look to us for leadership. We expect that many of those who will be centrally involved in this effort will be young people, our undergraduates and graduate students, our

postdocs, and our younger faculty. They will push us forward because they desperately want to live in a safer and cleaner world than the one they have inherited.

In closing, I want you to know that I understand that the time I have to present remarks to the Board is valuable and that I aim to use it well. My goal will be to inform you about issues the Senate is working on and to provide you with updates about our faculty, students, and staff. This year will be very, very tough, and none of us is starry eyed about it. But I firmly believe we have two things that will help us going forward. First, we will work together; we'll have to. The problems we face are simply too large and the uncertainties too great for us not to use our collective experience and expertise. Second, and more importantly, we have hope. I can hear it in your voices, if not always in your words. And I see it on your faces, even though we meet only through computer screens. Alongside hope, we must also have empathy and compassion for each other, especially for those among us who are most in need at this time. Chair Pérez, this concludes my remarks.