

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

James Steintrager, Chair of the Academic Senate

September 19, 2023

Thank you, Chair Leib. Good morning members of the Board. And good morning to all of you as another academic year begins. For many faculty, summer means not a break from teaching and thus from work—entrenched stereotypes notwithstanding—but a time to concentrate on and accelerate research projects, write the grants that are essential to upholding and funding UC’s research mission, plan new courses and consider pedagogical innovations, and much more. In the systemwide Academic Senate, our work has continued unabated over the past couple of months, but not without a changing of the guard.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Susan Cochran, immediate past chair of the Academic Senate, for her mentorship and companionship over the past year and to officially introduce Dr. Steven Cheung, our Senate vice chair and your other faculty representative. Dr. Cheung and I have something in common in our research: sound and hearing. I from the angle of literary and cultural production; he as a clinician, surgeon, and medical researcher. Trust him with a scalpel and me with a poem—maybe. Dr. Cheung arrived at UCSF for a residency in 1993 and joined the faculty the following year. He is an otologist-neurologist, which turns out to be easier to say than otolaryngologist. His research focuses on conditions such as ringing in ears and hearing loss, how the brain changes in response to disease and learning, and therapies for hearing loss and related conditions. He has also been deeply involved in Academic Senate service both systemwide and on his campus. We come from different parts of the academic world and the plan is that our disciplinary and institutional knowledge and experience will be complementary.

I would now like to turn to a seemingly unavoidable topic: labor. From Hollywood to Michigan, Missouri, and Ohio, we see strikes of represented workers who are, among other things, seeking higher pay and better benefits. Last fall, UC saw strikes from graduate student teaching assistants and researchers, postdoctoral students, and academic researchers—and eventually finalized contracts for all bargaining units. It is not my intent to go into details on this front, but the effects of those labor actions and their settlement continue to reverberate within the university and are reshaping how we fulfil crucial parts of our mission, from teaching undergraduates to carrying out world-class research and producing the next generation of faculty researchers. I’m happy to report that the Academic Planning Council, a joint administration-Senate advisory group, has launched a workgroup to address these effects: to figure out how to more clearly delineate academic training and progress from paid employment; to help us maintain the valuable aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship in graduate studies while respecting the difference between training and employment; and to consider funding impacts on and new funding models for graduate studies, among other things. Given the importance of the workgroup’s charge, I very much look forward to their analyses and recommendations.

In addition to labor issues related to graduate student researchers, teaching assistants, postdocs, and academic researchers, we frequently hear at public comment from represented staff their understandable concerns about the cost of housing, the time and monetary cost of commutes, and the erosive impact of inflation. We also heard policy-covered staff in public comment yesterday and today express their concerns, particularly about the potential of increases to retirement contributions. Like policy-covered staff, faculty within the Academic Senate are not represented by a union. Within the Office of the President and before the Board, however, the Senate is the main organization representing

faculty interests and articulating faculty concerns. High inflation, housing costs, and lagging salaries are all significant concerns for faculty too, and we must acknowledge this. On the financial side, *competitive total remuneration* for faculty should be an institutional priority.

What I would like to focus on today, however, is the organization of faculty labor in another sense: the way that we as faculty apportion our work. Our missions, which we share with the institution, are research, teaching, and service. Under research, we include creative outputs or what we might call cultural innovation. With some exceptions, for instance, professors of teaching and like titles, faculty tend to identify most closely with their research and creative output. Ask me what I do and who I am, and I'll tell you what I write about, perform, aim to discover, cure, or elucidate. Teaching is important, of course, and one of the key features of UC and other research universities is that our teaching is informed by our research. I would say that the inverse is true too. The classroom is a lab of sorts, where ideas, arguments, and hypotheses are tried and tested. This dialectical feature of teaching at UC is one of our great strengths and something that we must strive to preserve even as we cope with increasingly lopsided faculty-student ratios—something we'd like to ameliorate. We must also preserve the complementarity of teaching and research as we adapt to and incorporate non-traditional teaching modalities, new techniques, and new technologies and technological capabilities. Generative AI and large language models, anyone? As for service, this is a capacious category, under which we might include everything from clinical practice to professional duties such on serving on editorial boards, reviewing manuscripts, rating grant applications; various forms of public engagement; serving on departmental, schoolwide, and campuswide committees; serving on search committees; reading and ranking graduate student fellowship applications. The list could easily go on and be given in greater detail.

One of the effects of the pandemic was an all-hands-on-deck redistribution of effort to the instructional mission. We needed to figure out how to teach remotely, how to engage students in new modalities and do so in ways that were respectful of their privacy, their personal circumstances, and their need for flexibility. Research activity was in most cases curtailed, and for some became temporarily impossible. Many of what I hesitate to call the burdens of pandemic-era teaching remain. Flexibility, for example, which has become for many students a standard expectation, comes with costs for instructors. And, as already noted, faculty-student ratios still lag our institutional goals considerably. Having said that, research overall has come roaring back. Faculty not only *want* to pursue their research, but they *need* to: it is the most important factor in career advancement and, to put it bluntly, remuneration. It is also what makes us competitive in the academic marketplace, should we be tempted for whatever reason to seek employment elsewhere. I think it's fair and accurate to say that our research-teaching balance is out of joint, and we have recently launched another Academic Planning Council workgroup that acknowledges the balance issue post-pandemic and aims to offer constructive ways to rebalance without, hopefully, loss of the positive aspects of what we learned over the past three plus years.

I've mentioned teaching and research, but how does service fit into the faculty workload balance? My fear is that treating service as something of an afterthought to teaching and research is a real risk. And yet, service and in particular Senate service is essential to UC's excellence and distinctiveness. I quote: "The Regents recognize that faculty participation in the shared governance of the University of California through the agency of the Academic Senate ensures the quality of instruction, research and public

service at the University and protects academic freedom” (UC Regents Bylaw 40.1). Senate service, in other words, provides the insurance of UC quality.

Let me be frank: the extrinsic rewards of service are not obvious. That is, service, including Senate service, is not the clear path to career advancement that research is. Not surprisingly then, between the pandemic and post-pandemic unbalancing of faculty missions and longstanding time-and-effort related disincentives to serve, we have occasionally faced difficulties recruiting for key roles on our Senate committees. We do find people to serve, however, and it is worth pointing out that when asked, most faculty who have served in Senate celebrate the *intrinsic* rewards of such service. We also find that faculty who do serve once on Senate committees and workgroups tend to serve again and again. They are willing to carve out the time because they genuinely care about the overall quality of the University. They express satisfaction, pride, and even enjoyment in this aspect of our labor, but *if and only if* work is really getting done and *if and only if* our voice is listened to. Note that I said, “listened to,” which doesn’t necessarily mean “heeded.” In the Academic Senate, we understand that shared governance entails cooperation, collaboration, and, at times, compromise—excluding compromise on core principles such as academic freedom. Governance, as I don’t have to explain to the Board, sets forth the ideal as a model but is ever tempered by the limitations of practice and externalities. It is, to use the technical term, frequently messy. As faculty representative to the Board, I look forward to a year of voicing the concerns, aspirations, experience, and insights of my colleagues. I know that there will be moments—perhaps many moments—of messiness and that we do not proceed without peril. I also know that we share a commitment to UC and how it serves not just Californians, but in so many ways, people around the world.