



Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Steven W. Cheung, Chair of the Academic Senate

September 18, 2024

Good morning, Regents, President Drake, faculty, students, staff, and other members of the University of California community. My name is Steven Cheung, not to be confused with another Steven Cheung on the national political scene who is in an altogether different line of work. I want to express my deep gratitude for the privilege of serving this academic year as one of two Faculty Representatives to the Board of Regents. Ahmet Palazoglu, Professor of Chemical Engineering at UC Davis, joins me as Vice Chair of the systemwide Academic Senate. I am a Professor of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery at UCSF who delivers health care to my community and beyond, and trial treatments for bothersome phantom sounds localized inside the head. I am an immigrant from Hong Kong whose life has been shaped by the lived experience of being transported from public housing to public service, enabled by the most powerful engine of social mobility in America—quality education accessible to all who are willing to do their part.

High-quality education is what the Academic Senate promotes and protects, discharging duties conferred by Regental delegated authority over educational policy—to “determine the conditions for admission and for certificates and degrees,” and to “authorize and supervise all courses and curricula”—enveloped by the overarching desire for effective shared governance at the University of California to excel in our mission areas of teaching, research, and service. Expanding student access to quality education, the essential vehicle by which learners can choose their professional destinies, is central to our purpose. But the operative word is “quality”—difficult to sustain and easy to degrade—because it requires intentional investments to shore up faculty support and to innovate in course design and curricula, teaching modality, and instructional pedagogy. There is a disturbing decades-long trend of increasing student-to-faculty ratio. Our undergraduate students are now less apt to feel comfortable enough to ask their professors for a letter of recommendation. A more distant teacher-student relationship is the harbinger of perhaps wider quality erosion that deserves our collective wisdom to develop corrective action.

The deliberative ethos of the Academic Senate can sometimes be frustrating to those who have a clairvoyant vision and unbridled passion for the next obvious step to advance the University, but cannot move their initiative quickly enough due to perceived halting consultations with the faculty. Having been completely certain and completely wrong at multiple instances in my career, I have come to conclude that it is better to restrain enthusiasm and err on the side of careful consideration. A recent example is the Regents Policy on Public and Discretionary Statements by Academic Units. Adherence to standard deliberative processes would have obviated the need for multiple volleys of time-constrained feedback from the faculty on this proposed new policy. Entertaining oppositional views, responding to suggestions, and revising proposals are some of the most important elements of prudent University stewardship to ensure quality.

Academics relish kicking the tires before crystallizing opinions. It is who we are and what qualifies us as teacher-scholars. UC administrators come and go but faculty stay for 30 years. Faculty representation mediated by the Academic Senate is an indispensable component in the exercise of shared governance at the University. Whenever that occasional matter within the delegated authority to the Senate does rise to the level of Board consideration, I submit it is best practice that there be a full and thorough discussion of the item and a clear explanation for any variance between the Board and the Senate. It is the institutional secret sauce to an enduring, productive, and mutually respectful shared governance relationship. Regrettably, the University has drifted away from this time-tested successful practice in recent years. Now is the time for the Board and central administration to rekindle effective partnership with the Academic Senate.

We have already taken a step in that direction at the start of this new academic year. Provost Newman, Vice Provost Haynes, and I will present findings and recommendations of the Presidential Task Force on Instructional Modalities and UC Quality Undergraduate Degree Programs later this morning. Fulsome consultations with members of the Board, administration, and faculty delivered an on-time report that is currently under review by President Drake. I would like to build on this positive momentum, as we work together on matters related to student preparation for freshman admission and junior transfer to the University, shaping and forming campus pilots of online degree programs, and planning for a potential UC systemwide conversion to a semester-based academic calendar. Across these priority areas and others, the Academic Senate is deeply committed to accessible quality education at the University of California, where wondrous opportunities become marvelous realities for the peoples of our State and beyond.