



Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Susannah Scott, Chair of the Academic Senate

September 15, 2026

Good morning, Regents, President Milliken, faculty, staff, students, and all members of the University of California community,

Admission to the University of California is a very desirable commodity. Today, I want to reflect on the reason access to UC is so highly valued — why there are always more aspiring students wanting to enroll than we have space for, and why many of our supporters urge us to admit ever larger numbers of students each year. The broad appeal can be described in just two words: **academic excellence**. Students want to be at UC because they perceive, correctly, our preeminence in research, teaching, and public service.

We can all agree, I think, that educational access is fully compatible with excellence. We are more than a great university; we're a great public university, striving to serve the people of California in all their magnificent diversity. Contrast this with the model of the private university, which is excellence coupled with exclusivity. That approach would be unrecognizable at UC. But, emphasizing access without excellence would be deeply problematic for us too. Our university's allure would plummet if our academic distinction were to fade.

The foundation of our institutional excellence is faculty excellence. Our hiring and merit review processes, and the involvement of the Academic Senate in the shared governance of the University, are constructed to ensure it. They center discerning academic judgment in our decision-making.

At this moment, our excellence is threatened in so many ways, including proposed rules that would apply political criteria to the evaluation of research grants; heavy-handed efforts to narrow the scope of intellectual inquiry; class sizes so large that students and instructors barely get to know each other; bureaucratic requirements that are inefficient and duplicative; and a shrinking in the ranks of experienced staff whose primary jobs are to assist the faculty.

It's quite possible to believe that UC is, nevertheless, doing quite well. Apart from the five newly minted Nobel Prizes we celebrated last year, there are the Pulitzer Prizes we will hear about today, and the UC Regents' Innovation Awards that we will inaugurate tomorrow. Each of these prizes is the culmination of many years of intense work by one faculty colleague, or a group of us. They represent, if you will, the past excellence of UC. But I want to focus attention now on our future excellence. It starts with the brilliance of UC's newest faculty members.

So far in 2026, 54 assistant professors across all our main campuses have received the National Science Foundation's most prestigious award for untenured faculty, the so-called CAREER award. Every one of these awards is an individual honor. There were nine worthy recipients from our oldest campus, UC Berkeley, and also three from our newest campus, UC Merced. Think about those award numbers: nine and three. The upstart, Merced, has about 20% of the active ladder-rank faculty that Berkeley has. That makes its recent success in this intensely competitive space pretty amazing. In fact, three of our smallest campuses by student population (Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Merced) earned an impressive 16 NSF CAREER awards between them, at the same time that our three largest campuses (LA, Berkeley, and San Diego, with 60% more ladder-rank faculty), received 22 of these awards.

The NSF CAREER award is not a unique example. The Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (the PECASE) is described as the highest honor given by the U.S. government to outstanding STEM researchers in the early stages of their independent research careers. Last year, UC's faculty won over two dozen PECASE awards. UC San Diego and UC Berkeley researchers received an impressive five awards each; and UC Riverside had three award winners. I will note that the size of the ladder-rank faculty at Riverside relative to San Diego and Berkeley is about 60%, making the successes in this competition pretty much on par.

I don't have time to mention every campus, let alone every field. My point with these numbers is to impress on the Board that we are nurturing faculty excellence on every one of our campuses. But our University's profile overall is changing rapidly. There is one institutional shift faculty find especially concerning. In the past 15 years or so, the number of ladder-rank faculty has increased systemwide by about 10%, while our total student population has grown by 30%, or three times as fast. As a fraction of UC employees, general-campus ladder-rank faculty appear to have declined about 40% over this period.

Why does this matter? Our NSF CAREER and PECASE awardees, and all of our early career faculty, are the inventors, the entrepreneurs, the MacArthur Fellows, and the Pulitzer Prize winners of tomorrow. Inadequate faculty hiring today will affect both the prestige of UC and its ability to drive California's innovation economy in the decades to come. I'll illustrate this

using an example from the federal government's recently launched Genesis Mission, which aims to build out artificial intelligence for science. Fully 15% of this initiative's projects are being led by UC researchers from our campuses and our affiliated National Labs. Our ability to compete at this high level in a rapidly emerging research area is a direct consequence of the incredibly deep bench of expertise and creativity in our ladder-rank faculty. In other words, it results from investments made in faculty hiring years ago. And as AI ushers in dramatic changes to how our world works, UC can expect to lead the way because of this expertise. We will not maintain our leadership position for long if we do not continue to hire the best new faculty, and keep them long enough for them to lean in to future challenges and opportunities.

The University of California will adapt to the rapidly changing landscape for higher education. The one thing we must not let go is our dedication to academic excellence. Here are some questions faculty are asking themselves in this regard: What constitutes a first-rate college education today? How will we sustain our excellence in doctoral education as we confront fierce financial headwinds? Which urgent research questions should we pursue, and how should we value the patience and long-term commitment of faculty who choose instead to investigate questions that no-one has asked before?

At a very high level, I offer these answers: Faculty need exceptional colleagues to work with, both senior and junior. We also need motivated students we can inspire, and who inspire us. We need an unflinching commitment to academic freedom and, no less, for all UC faculty to feel protected by it. We need campus spaces, both physical and virtual, where we can engage in cutting-edge scholarship and unleash creativity. We need to belong to an institution that values and prioritizes academics and is relentless in its pursuit of quality. We need visionary leaders who understand how academic excellence is the source of UC's enduring appeal to students and to California, how it creates the demand for access. Ultimately, we need all of you to continue to be genuine partners with all of us, in ensuring UC's bright future.

Chair Anguiano, this concludes my remarks.