

Remarks to the UC Board of Regents

Susan Cochran, Chair of the Academic Senate

September 21, 2022

Thank you, Chair Leib, and good morning to you all. I am intensely grateful for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you today.

Regent Leib stole a bit of my thunder on introducing Jim Steintrager, our new Vice Chair of the Senate. Rather than present Jim's more academic qualifications which Regent Leib has already mentioned, let me just speak to what he is like in the classroom. Here I'll let one of his students at Rate My Professors Dot Com speak to the question: "He is a great professor...His lectures are clear and he's got a great personality. The reading load was very dense and the paper topics were challenging. Tough midterm and final. He's extremely smart and knows his stuff, but it's crazy hard. Be prepared to work."

Let me begin my comments by thanking President Drake and everyone here at UC San Diego for hosting us. At the risk of alienating other campuses, including my own, let me also say this is one of the most beautiful UC campuses in our system. A walk yesterday morning across the grounds past buildings postured to inspire all who study and work here helped me to finalize these remarks.

We are coming to the denouement of what has been a very challenging health crisis and concomitant period of social change. In the pandemic's early moments, we each scattered to our individual or familial cocoons to wait out the danger. The world around us got very quiet and still abruptly. But then we learned how to carry on. At the UC, remote teaching and work kept us in the hunt for academic and research excellence. Our first responders in the medical centers and on the campuses stepped up at great personal danger. Our staff and students learned new ways of staying connected. And the faculty, often the subject of stereotypes that would suggest otherwise, demonstrated a profound capacity to pivot into the world of remote instruction and mentoring, even sometimes at the cost of their own research careers.

Last academic year, with the situation somewhat improved, our campuses took the brave step of trying to reopen—not fully and certainly not unchanged—but we started out on our trudge back from a world of isolation and began once again to embrace the spaces that fuel excellence at the University of California. In doing so, it was clear that things were not as we had left them months before. Some students, particularly first generation, lower income and racial/ethnic minorities had more trouble with making progress where those difficulties had not existed

before. Many staff decided to move on to new employment opportunities. And we have also begun to see evidence of the loss of underrepresented racial/ethnic minority faculty at an unsustainable rate if we are to meet our goals of diversifying the faculty.

In a faculty survey conducted by the systemwide Academic Senate last spring, the results of which will be presented at our next Regents meeting, we documented some of the pandemic-related damage faculty and instructors are seeing and experiencing themselves. Our respondents reported that their students, some of whom had not been in a classroom in a long while, needed help learning or relearning how to excel as UC students. And nearly three-quarters of faculty and instructors also reported that their sense of connection to their campus has been harmed.

Why is this troubling? Why should loss of an academic community concern us? After all, many professors have always had a hybrid work arrangement, balancing the solitude of working alone that is essential for creative productivity with in-person engagements in classrooms, seminars, and research spaces. The truth is faculty don't just go to campus to teach; they also go to be recharged by their interactions with others. This is the secret sauce of comprehensive research universities; the physical environment itself is a catalyst for new knowledge. On campus, interdisciplinary collisions of divergent ideas propel faculty and students and post-doctoral trainees closer to the edges of the discovery frontier. And in this frothy stewpot of innovation and entrepreneurship, mentoring and networking of students *and* faculty occurs almost by osmosis. The community of scholars matters.

An additional stressor for the faculty these past three years is that the emergent need to accommodate to pandemic-driven instructional demands is crowding out faculty's capacity to meet their other work responsibilities. We are a public research institution where faculty have a quadripartite set of responsibilities: classroom instruction, yes, but also: conducting research or other creative activities, mentoring students who have research and professional career aspirations of their own, and providing service to the University and the public.

Together, then, the pandemic-related effects of loss of connectedness to colleagues and the pivoting of faculty work life to only one of the four domains of their responsibility may lie at the heart of faculty harm from the pandemic. To move forward, the Senate and the Administration have agreed to create a joint workgroup charged with making recommendations to remedy these issues. We need to rebuild an inclusive, supportive culture for *both* instructional *and* research excellence at the UC.

Speaking as an epidemiologist, this next year should be better. We can look forward to a much more fulsome recovery and growth. What we are hearing from the two semester campuses that have already opened is quite positive. Perhaps we will finally have the bandwidth to reflect on what we have all been through and to begin to make choices—driven by our shared commitment to excellence and service—about *what* from our experiences should be kept, at least in part, and what it is best we toss away. I, for one, have a few face shields that deserve a spot in the recycling bin.

In this opportunity for reflection, the UC will have a leg up on many other institutions of higher education. We are fortunate that the State of California recognized in its original 1849 constitution that the state “shall encourage, by all suitable means, the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral and agricultural improvement.” And in a subsequent 1868 revision legislated that “the University of California shall be...subject only to such legislative control as may be necessary to insure compliance with the terms of its endowment, and the proper investment and security of its funds.” This structure undergirds a common mission with the people of the State of California to use the best tools of a public research university to bring benefit to all those we serve. Within the UC as well, a strong tradition of shared governance, born a hundred years ago, also provides critical support for this commitment. Unique among many university systems, the UC Regental Bylaws embed a structural recognition that we do our best by working together.

How does shared governance work when it is hitting on all cylinders? Let me give you a recent example. Changes in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program were recently announced, allowing those with student loans who were previously refused participation in the PSLF program a limited opportunity for reconsideration. Many of our faculty and staff are eligible for the loan forgiveness but this requires documentation from the employer—and UCPath’s records are incomplete for the task. To get the employment verifications done by the October 31, 2022 deadline, we all need to work together. Senate faculty joined with systemwide UC Human Resources to contribute their expertise and mount townhalls in August to apprise UC employees of the procedures they will need to follow. Everyone, including the Academic Senate and the Administration, is trying to get the word out. HR offices on the campuses have pitched in. And the President’s Office is keeping close tabs on the matter. This is UC at its best—working as a team to get it done.

In closing, I again express my gratitude to the Board for this opportunity to share perspectives from the faculty. As with any new academic year, students, staff, and faculty are returning, if they haven’t already, looking forward to the excitement of discovery and growth on the

campuses. And this year, all are hopeful that it will be the last year of disruptions from the pandemic.

Next week, the Senate begins its deliberations over the many matters that will come before us. I will update you on our progress at future Regents meetings. While there will undoubtedly be many challenges that we face in the coming year, know that the Academic Senate is a committed partner in shared governance. We are always looking for innovative ways to ensure the excellence of a university system many of us have dedicated our careers to.

Thank you, Chair Leib, that concludes my remarks.