

UC Office of the President

Understanding the University's Role in American Culture and Society

Title

Remarks to the University of California Commission on the Future of the University

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1nj9n5k1>

Author

Gardner, David P.

Publication Date

2009-11-01

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Remarks by
David Pierpont Gardner
President Emeritus
The University of California
At a Meeting of
The University of California Commission
On the Future of the University
November 12, 2009

Chairman Gould, President Yudof and members of the Commission. I welcome the opportunity to be with you this morning.

The University of California was founded in 1868, some 141 years ago in what was then a raw frontier at the far reaches of the American West. It was then and remains today a new-comer to the world of universities. As you meet to consider its future, it is well to remember that, young though it may be, it is presently as respected and famous a university as even the most ancient universities in the United Kingdom and on the European continent. In the United States it stands pre-eminent among our nation's public universities and highly ranked among the handful of leading private universities. It is no small matter, therefore, to be asked to consider the future of such a university, given its remarkable past and the distinguished position it holds among the world's leading centers of learning.

How, within a mere century and one half, did the University of California become such an institution, especially given its great distance, for most of its short life, from the major centers of learning in our own country and abroad?

Well, it didn't just happen! It happened for several reasons, the most crucial of which form the substance of my remarks this morning.¹

My views on this are not held by me alone. Indeed, they have been shared and advanced by most of UC's academic, administrative, and regental leaders over the larger part of the 20th century, most of whom I have known personally. For example, of the 59 persons who served as Chairman or as Vice-Chairman of the Board of Regents since 1920 to the date of my retirement in 1992, I have known 53 of the 59. Of the 19 persons who served as UC's President, I have known 10. Prior to my retirement, I had known 45 of the University's 49 Chancellors and 20 of the 29 members of the faculty who chaired the Academic Council during those years.

Now to the reasons for UC's rise to eminence.

First, is UC's favored constitutional position as embodied in Article IX, Section IX, of the State Constitution. These provisions vest in the Board of Regents virtually unqualified authority to govern the university subject only to the board's fiduciary duties and the obligation to keep UC free from political and sectarian influence in the appointment of its officers and in the conduct of its internal affairs.

These provisions, enacted in 1879, were intended to put as much distance as possible between the university and the government whose judgments about university operations, programs, policies, teaching, research, public service, administration, faculty and

administrative appointments might otherwise come to prevail over those of the university itself. This freedom should never be the object of negotiation or compromise.

Second, is the conduct of the Board of Regents and the crucial decisions it has made over seven score years. How the board meets its responsibilities, interacts with the president and key administrative and faculty officers, organizes itself and makes decisions is telling, given its constitutional position.

Generally speaking, the Regents do not live in the world of academe even though they are charged constitutionally to govern it. Most of them live in a corporate, legal, political or professional culture with which the university's academic culture sometimes conflicts.

The reality, however, is that with three or four notable exceptions, the board has proven itself to be a real champion and protector of the university dedicated to its welfare, jealous of its independence, supportive of its presidents and chancellors, most of the time, and quite willing to assert its constitutional role when challenged.

Third, is the steady and diligent commitment to the concept of the University of California as one university operating now on 10 campuses. The university is a single corporate entity. It is governed by a single board of regents. There is one president appointed by the board to whom sufficient authority is given to exercise UC's central executive function. There is one Academic Senate, possessing authority delegated directly to it, not by the administration, but by the board itself. There is a single,

consolidated university budget for the state's share of UC funding. There is a single set of personnel policies, salary schedules, and policies for UC faculty and other academic personnel. There are university-wide negotiations, and some campus-based ones as well, with the unionized staff. There are common fees and charges for students across all campuses, except for a handful of campus-specific professional schools, programs and student facilities.

The concept of a single university operating on 10 campuses permits the university to reconcile and resolve its internal differences internally. Thus, it is enabled to speak as a single institution with its many parts on the same page, and with a common agenda, whatever the differences may have been when formulating such policies or budgets.

Fourth, is the willingness of the Board of Regents to delegate nearly all of its authority to the president and of the president, in turn, to delegate most of the president's authority to the chancellors so as to provide them with the means necessary to administer their respective campuses as well as to be their advocates.

The role of the president is pivotal to the sustainability of the university as a single institution; the effective functioning of the governing board and of the academic senate; the securing and allocation of UC's resources; the appointment of its key officers, the coherent exercise of its executive powers, the preservation of its constitutional autonomy; and the discharge of many of the university's ceremonial and symbolic obligations.

The president holds the single position within the university that is accountable for the totality of its endeavors. The chancellors are responsible to the president for the administration of their campuses. The vice presidents are staff to the president. The regents cannot act as individuals in their role but only collectively as to their governing duties. It is only the president who has responsibility as a single individual, and within the scope of delegated authority, to exercise the executive function for the university as a whole.

The realities, of course, are that the regents, the president, the vice presidents, the chancellors, the academic senate, the staff and the students must work together and with mutual respect and regard for UC's system of delegated authority and shared governance for it to work at all.

Fifth, is the regents decision in 1920 to delegate direct and full authority to the Academic Senate over courses of instruction and curricular requirements, for the setting of UC's academic standards and student admissions, and for the university's educational policy and programs in general. New campuses and schools and colleges were reserved to the board for approval as were major intercampus or university-wide research institutes, bureaus and centers.

The Academic Senate has the right to organize itself as it wishes, to create its special and standing committees, and its leadership as it chooses without interference from either the university's administrative officers or the regents.

While technically not a part of management, the Senate plays an indirect and sometimes a direct part in virtually every major decision made within the university; and my experience, when at UC, was that the Academic Senate leadership and committees advised and acted in the most thoughtful and rational of ways, respectful both of their roles and that of others.

Sixth, is the adoption of a common and rigorous standard for freshman admission to the nine campuses offering undergraduate instruction, consistent with California's Master Plan for Higher Education. A commitment was also made to find a place on one of its campuses for every qualified California resident seeking admission at the freshman level, although not necessarily at the campus of preference or in the major of choice. I am aware, of course, that with the present fiscal crisis this commitment is at risk. Admission of students to the Graduate Schools and professional schools and colleges, however, rests with the faculty of the admitting entity.

Seventh, is the university's development of multiple sources of income to augment and to leverage, the core support provided by the state. The university chose to follow this path decades ago, not because of waning state support or a dearth of students, but instead at the very time the state budget was favorable and enrollments were growing.

These varied sources of support, together with the discretion to allocate state appropriations as the university thought best, pennitted UC to make budgetary

adjustments based more on their merit than in response to pressure groups or political, gubernatorial or legislative influences, usually expressed in the form of threats or promises, or both.

Eight, is the generous levels of state support Californians have historically provided UC over the years. While it is not true that state funds for UC have been consistently favorable, or always sufficient, it is fair to say that on balance and over time they have been sufficient, if not even generous as circumstances allowed.

Californians have supported the university when things were going well, but sent UC a message via the state budget when they were unhappy or even furious with us, as during the loyalty oath controversy of 1949-52, the free speech movement of 1964, and the anti-Vietnam war protests of the late 1960's, among others.

Nine, is the steady and enduring commitment to the underlying values of academic life by most parties within the university, buttressed by a system of governance and management which is mostly designed to secure these very objectives.

In remarks made to the regents in 1985, during the controversy over the divestment of UC's holdings in companies doing business in South Africa, I made reference to these most elemental values as follows:

"The University of California, like all universities in America, is committed to the established values of academic life: patient inquiry, the sequential development of ideas, the emphasis on reasoned discussion and criticism; and the continued reference to evidence. These values affirm the University's faith in intelligence and knowledge and its obligation to ensure the conditions for their free exercise...

"These values are the means by which the cause of truth is carried forward. They are the values that distinguish the University from governments, churches, businesses and other institutions, parties, groups, and associations in our society. They form the core of the enterprise and the basis of whatever respect and freedom the University can hope to command from the larger society".

Tenth, is the unwavering commitment of the entire university community to achieve at the highest possible levels whatever it undertakes to do, and I emphasize, for all campuses, not just two or three. It is this self-imposed standard of excellence that has guided UC's faculty recruitment and retention policies; the procurement and/or construction of the most advanced laboratories, equipment, clinics, and computer capabilities; to build one of the world's greatest and most electronically advanced library systems; to draw resources to its campuses from governments, donors, alumni, corporations and foundations worldwide; to attract the world's most promising young people to study under a faculty world-renowned for its scholarship and scientific accomplishments; and to number more than one-half of its campuses among members of the American Association of Universities and within the top 20 public universities in the United States. As with the University's autonomy and freedom, this tenth pillar, and the excellence it reflects, must never be the object of negotiation or compromise.

Within the constraints of time this morning, I will not be able to comment on the issues with which you will be contending as a commission. I would only note that most of these

are not new but issues with a history that tend to arise during periods of institutional stress and/or fiscal uncertainty. The same will most likely be true for many of the the suggestions you will be receiving.

My only advice is that you study the efficacy of the 12th grade, the transition to university, and the freshman year of university. Each is now not an optimal experience for students. Each cannot be considered independently as actions in one area directly impact the other, e.g., earning of AP credits in high school will impact the number of credits a UC student must earn at the university.

A more effective and efficient set of educational possibilities, freshly examined, might very well suggest modifications in the present arrangements, such as making a more fulsome and serious use of the 12th grade and/or the engagement of university extension's concurrent courses of study, and similarly, of the community colleges offerings, and those of summer sessions, during the 12th grade and/or after its completion but before formal enrollment in the university as an undergraduate. The timely offering of remedial work in some areas and the completion of more university-level work prior to official university enrollment holds out the possibility of accelerating the entire process without any substantive diminishment of academic work expected or required of such students.

Such also holds the promise of major cost savings for the schools, the university, and the students by reducing the number of years now required for formal study and making more effective use of the time spent, both by the students and the institutions serving

them. Consideration of a three year baccalaureate degree would naturally arise from such an examination as would the prospect of a move by the university from a semester or a quarter system to a trimester one or some other rearrangement of the academic year.

The nation seems to be talking about a three year degree. The UK and continental Europe are already committed to such an arrangement, albeit the academic expectations of entering students in that system are at present more demanding than are our own, which provides four years of study for the same degree as is offered in the UK and Continental Europe in three.

In any event, a hard look at the options here is much needed although you can expect no small measure of push-back from interested parties.

The ten points or pillars upon which the university's rise to eminence rests can be tampered with only at a very real and dangerous risk to the delicate balances within the university's private and subtle inner life. These pillars are not to be surrendered or relinquished point by point merely because the university is currently under fiscal stress, or bartered away for short term gains or because they are inconvenient to defend, or because of the pressure of political threats or promises. No! They are to be explained, defended, advanced, and employed in the university's service.

It is also worth remembering, in our time of travail, that our predecessors since the 12th century somehow managed in the face of complacency, indifference, ignorance, hostility

and despair to lift the lamp of learning high enough to illuminate not only the university's sense of its own enduring purposes, but also, its link to a more broadly civilized and cultured society. Fiat Lux!

¹Portions of my remarks are elaborated in my 2005 David Dodds Henry Lecture at The University of Illinois, Chicago, "The California System: Governing and Management Principles and Their Link to Academic Excellence"; and in my memoirs published by The University of California Press in 2005, Earning My Degree: Memoirs of an American University President.
