

UC Merced

AIARU: Panel 2 - Organization and Structure of the Modern Research University

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Publication Date

2009-11-13

Supplemental Material

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**Academic Innovation and the American Research University
Symposium**

University of California, Merced
November 13, 2009

**Panel #2: Organization and Structure of the Modern Research
University**

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**UC MERCED DEAN,
SCHOOL OF
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I'm really happy you're all here. This is a very important session for us and we look forward to your good comments. I'll just make a few, a few points. I was coming down here this morning and I ran into Martha [Conklin]. She was going the other way, and I thought, "Martha, you're supposed be coming to the same place that I'm going." And she said, "Well, I've got another meeting." She said, "We're supposed to be provocative." Martha wants us to be provocative. And I thought, "I'm not wearing provocative clothes. I don't know exactly what that means."

But iPhones are great. So "provocative" means, "tending to provoke, excite, stimulate, irritate, or vex," according to my cell phone. So I'll try to do that.

First let me start by saying I think the premise of our session here is wrong. [*laughter*] What the hell's that supposed to mean? Well, it starts out by saying how should universities as academic administrative units be optimally organized. And I suggest that they can't, at least not ours.

We're a public research university. And by definition, we have multiple objectives. We don't have a single objective, and so the idea of finding an optimal academic structure is a fallacy. We have multiple objectives and those objectives conflict. So the optimal academic structure to support our research is probably at conflict with our optimal academic structure for undergraduate research.

Our optimal academic structure to minimize costs is probably at odds with our optimal academic structure that will support having an impact on the future of the students of the Central Valley. And we probably have a long list of objectives. And there's probably a degree of conflict among all those objectives.

So before we can start looking at what's the best administrative structure or academic structure, we need to realize there probably is no best or optimal. We need to understand the tradeoffs among these things. We really have to have a clear idea, a shared vision, if you will, as to what our objectives are as we move forward, and then we can start crafting an academic structure that best supports that what is probably a very, very complex pattern of objectives that we have.

So that's a tough thing to do. And so I think we need to have a clear idea of where we're headed before we stop and, and start looking at solutions. What is the best structure, we need to understand where we're headed.

A couple of other points, and I'm going to be very brief here. That term I just read said "academic administrative units." You know, an academic structure is different than an administrative structure. And we need to also recognize that our administrative structure is extremely important in supporting our academic structure. I'm talking here about how we deal with data, how we monitor and assess how we're doing, the communication

infrastructure that we have, our ability to be decisive as we grow. This is particularly important for a new university, is being decisive so that we can move forward deliberately but also fall back if we make wrong decisions and undo those decisions and move forward again. We're, we're very malleable right now. We're not going to make perfect decisions, but we have to make decisions. We have to communicate and we have to have trust among our leadership and our faculty and our faculty governance so that we all have that shared vision that we can move forward with.

And so it's a very complicated thing that doesn't start with the academic structure. We need to think about all these other things while we're still malleable and...

You know, when we started, those of us who were here at the beginning, we started and we didn't really know what we were doing, I'm not sure we do yet, but we thought if we can just get the buildings built, we'll be on our way. And we realized that as the buildings started coming on line, that was just the beginning.

And so then we thought, well, if we can just open our doors and get our first students in this place, then we'll be on our way. And then we thought, well, if we can just graduate our first students, we'll be on our way and things will be downhill from there. And that was a few months ago, and we're not. We're not over the crest. We have a lot of challenges ahead.

A couple of other points that I want to follow on that I heard this morning. One is promoting interdisciplinary scholarship. And that's also a balance. Whether--in my experience, it's very difficult to dictate interdisciplinary scholarship. And, and, in fact, I came from a place that was top down and we tried to do that and didn't do very well. So the discussions we had very early on with our first

faculty and our first administration was really, how do we remove the barriers that tend to get in the way of multidisciplinary scholarship? And I think we've done that fairly well in some cases.

But that's very different than saying can we promote and ignite interdisciplinary scholarship. And so there's a balance there and I think it has implications for our academic structure and also our administrative structure to be able to do that effectively. And there are certainly cost considerations and effort considerations and leadership considerations in doing that. These are all intertwined.

So I think a first step is to try to do what we can to remove the barriers to let interdisciplinary scholarship happen rather than trying to be too prescriptive in what that interdisciplinary scholarship will be. Because the great danger is that as we try to prescribe those things, we leave certain members of our community out of that equation. And that's a shame. We've got a lot of people here coming here to do great things, and if we focus too narrowly on what we want to be, the pillars as we used to call, what are the pillars of this place. We realize that as we stake out a pillar we may be alienating people who came here to help build this university. And we're still very much in that mode.

Finally, I was very happy to see that the discussion early on that Shawn [Kantor] and Alex [Whalley] started, and it was followed on by some of the other speakers, about the land grant ethic. And this is one I'm particularly interested in. There's been a lot written, as you probably all know, about the land grant ethic. In fact, we had some top members of our community, Karl Pister and, for one, who's written some really good stuff and had some really great ideas about the new land grant ethic. And I think we should pay very serious attention to that. That should be high on our list of

objectives. The reason we're here in the Central Valley is because the Central Valley needs what we ought to be able to provide. And that should be reflected through our academic structure, and we should take very seriously that goal and mission. And I think we've done some of that but I think that we've lost some of that from the early days of the building of this new university. So that should be high on our list, and if we can help move forward with sort of a new land grant ethic, I think there's a lot to be gained not only for our university but so we can support the other campuses in being able to have that kind of impact on the state of California. And hopefully that will help us with the legislature and what Mark [Yudof] is trying to achieve there. So those are my comments that I'll throw out and hopefully I will be irritating and vexing through those comments. [*applause*]