

UC Office of the President

The Atkinson Presidency

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The 1868 Organic Act proclaimed that the University of California would be led by a “President of the several Faculties . . . [who would also be] the executive head of the institution in all its departments.” Despite this sweeping description of the president’s powers, the office carried academic but little administrative authority in the early days of the University. In 1890, for example, it took a special amendment to the Regents’ Bylaws to give the president authority “to employ, dismiss, and regulate the duties of janitors.”¹ As late as 1901, the Regents were still giving individual consideration to each request for replacement of a lost diploma. It was not until the administration of Benjamin Ide Wheeler (1899–1920) that the president truly became, in fact as well as in theory, the chief executive officer of the University.

By the late 1950s, however, it was clear that the University had outgrown the ability of any one person to administer. The

enormous Baby Boom generation was coming of college age, and the University was planning the expansion of its existing campuses and the creation of three new ones at La Jolla, Irvine, and Santa Cruz. Recognizing that these new circumstances required new ways of organizing the University, the Regents and the president embarked on a course of decentralizing authority and responsibility to the individual campuses and chancellors. The far-reaching changes they instituted created the University of California as we know it today: a federated system of ten research universities, each seeking excellence in its own way but unified by common standards for the admission of students, the appointment and promotion of faculty, and the approval of academic programs, and united in its pursuit of the common goals of educating students, discovering and creating knowledge, and serving the people of California. As a result, the University of California is more than the sum of its individual campuses. It is a vast educational enterprise created and sustained by California's citizens.

Today the University is an eleven-billion-dollar organization that stretches the length and breadth of California, encompassing ten campuses—each with its own chancellor—166,000 undergraduate and graduate students, nearly 400,000 students enrolled in University Extension, 7,000 faculty, nearly 150,000 employees, and almost 850,000 living alumni. The president is responsible for the overall policy direction of the University and shares authority for its operation with the faculty, to whom the Regents have delegated primary responsibility for educational policy, and with the chancellors, each of whom reports to the president but has broad responsibility for the day-to-day management of his or her campus.

The president has many duties within this multicampus system; the Standing Orders of the Regents list forty separate responsibilities. But in my judgment the most important boil down to the following:

- The president is responsible for recommending to the Regents the appointment of chancellors and for conducting the five-year reviews of their performance. Probably no other presidential responsibility has as dramatic and lasting an influence on the character, quality, and success of the University of California.

- The president is responsible for recommending new policy directions to the Regents. Many issues and decisions facing the University involve only one campus and are entirely within the purview of the chancellor and the campus community. Many other issues cut across campuses and demand a University-wide perspective and action, and it is on these issues that the president is expected to lead. This cannot be done successfully without widespread consultation among Regents, faculty, staff, students, and anyone else who has something to contribute and a stake in the outcome. Recent examples are the establishment of a tenth U.C. campus and the decision to offer domestic-partner health benefits.

- The president is responsible for preparing and managing the budget of the University and for assuring the Regents, the governor and the legislature, and the public that the University is exercising good stewardship of the public funds entrusted to its care. The Office of the President, through the University Auditor, sets University-wide policies and professional standards in this area, monitors audit activities throughout

the system, and reports to the Regents on these activities. It is also important to note that our stewardship responsibilities are not limited only to the use of public funds—in a larger sense, the University must also demonstrate that it is worthy of the loyalty, support, and confidence the people of California have given it over many years.

- Similarly, the president is responsible for ensuring the quality of the University's academic programs systemwide, for helping to shape decisions about which academic fields to emphasize at which campuses, for seeing that all campuses comply with University-wide policy and regulations, and for overseeing the creation of new campuses. When things go right, this monitoring and oversight role is virtually invisible to the world outside the University's doors. When they go wrong, the president is front and center in the public spotlight. Despite U.C.'s decentralized character and the broad campus authority delegated to the chancellors, the president bears ultimate responsibility for the University—and is regularly and forcefully reminded of that fact by unhappy officials, irate citizens, and, on occasion, dissatisfied students.

- Although the president is not the only person who represents U.C., he or she is the only person who can speak on behalf of the entire University. Each chancellor speaks for his or her campus; the faculty, on behalf of the academic interests of the University; students, staff, and alumni, on behalf of their constituencies; the Regents, on broad questions of policy. The president is the bridge to each and all of these. This is a humbling, sobering, and occasionally alarming thought for the occupant of the president's office. And it suggests a critical dimension of the

president's role that no delegation of authority or job description can capture. The president must see that the various members of the University's huge extended family are talking to each other, working with each other, and headed in roughly the same direction. This is neither easy nor always achievable, especially in times of controversy and conflict. But it is essential.

As the seventeenth president of this great university, I am following in the footsteps of an impressive company of academic leaders: Henry Durant, Daniel Coit Gilman, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, Robert Gordon Sproul, and Clark Kerr, to mention a few. The presidency has changed as the University has grown and prospered. It remains, however, the pivotal influence for managing and supporting one of the most distinguished and productive university systems in the world.

Finally, let me say that one of my goals as president is to see that the educational experience of U.C.'s students is as good as we can make it. I believe that U.C. offers an undergraduate and graduate education second to none, but only because the quality of that education is a paramount concern not only to me but also to the chancellors and the faculty. As well it should be. Much has changed since U.C. burst on the scene in 1868 with a student body of thirty-eight and a faculty of ten, but students remain now, as they were then, the lifeblood of the University.

NOTES

This piece was published in U.C. student newspapers in December 1997.

1. Verne A. Stadtman, ed., *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967).