

July 2009

AN OPEN LETTER TO UC ALUMNI AND FRIENDS

At the corner of 13th and Franklin Streets in downtown Oakland, a worn bronze plaque hangs on the wall of a two-story parking garage. Easy to miss, state Historical Marker No. 45 identifies the spot where, 140 years ago, a California miracle began. Here the University of California spent its infancy, occupying a two-story Victorian that had housed one of the state's first colleges. In 1873 the university – after graduating an original class of 12 – migrated to Berkeley and began its rise as a land-grant college dedicated to teaching agriculture, mining and the mechanical arts.

The enterprise, of course, has endured, and then some. Under the stewardship of some great leaders, and with the support of alumni like you and, for that matter, all of California, the University has grown from its humble origins to the point where it now stretches all across the state, from Merced to Santa Barbara, Riverside to San Francisco, Irvine to Santa Cruz, San Diego to Davis, Los Angeles to Berkeley – 10 campuses, five medical centers, three national laboratories, 225,000 students, 55 Nobel Prizes and 1.6 million alumni.

It is to that great army of alumni, along with other friends and beneficiaries of the University of California, that we write today, and we do so with a sense of great urgency – to ask you to become engaged as never before in building legislative and financial support for this great institution.

This is a time of peril for the University we all love.

The UC model – providing universal access to a top-notch, low-cost education and research of the highest caliber – continues to be studied around the globe among those who would emulate its success. And yet, this model has been increasingly abandoned at home by the state government responsible for its core funding.

In the past 20 years, the amount of money allotted to the University through the state budget has fallen dramatically: General Fund support for a UC

student stood at \$15,860 in 1990. If current budget projections hold, it will drop this year to \$7,680.

Moreover, it now appears likely the UC system, in this current fiscal crisis, will be ordered by Sacramento to absorb yet another \$800-plus million in additional cuts. Its 2009-10 core budget will be reduced by an estimated 20 percent. This will bring the amount of state investment in the University down to \$2.4 billion – exactly where it was in real dollars a decade ago.

In the same time frame, by the way, funding for state prisons has more than doubled, from \$5 to \$11 billion. It's been reported that, based on current spending trends, California's prison budget soon will overtake that of the state's universities and community colleges.

And so, our work is cut out for us. As one Chairman of the Board of Regents steps down and another takes over, we are asking you, as stewards of UC, to step up and help arrest this slide of support, as quickly as possible. It's often said that it takes 40 years to build up a great university, but only a few to tear one down.

Elected officials in Sacramento who control our core budget must be asked to re-examine their priorities when it comes to future higher education funding. They also need to understand that a fiscal crisis is precisely the wrong time to be putting the pinch on education. Consider what Thomas Friedman of the New York Times wrote in a recent column:

“... The country that uses this crisis to make its population smarter and more innovative – and endows its people with more tools and basic research to invent new goods and services – is the one that will not just survive but thrive down the road. We might be able to stimulate our way back to stability, but we can only invent our way back to prosperity. We need everyone at every level to get smarter.”

The core money UC receives from taxpayers, via Sacramento, goes to the nuts and bolts of higher education, everything from paying professors to lighting laboratories. But it also establishes the institutional foundation needed to attract the research grants and endowments that enhance the mission and burnish the University's international status.

Over time it's been money well-spent. Of the more than 4,000 higher education institutions in the nation, only 60 research universities, public and private, have been judged worthy of membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities. The UC has six members. No other state system has more than one.

In turn, the University has given back to California, not only by educating generations of high-achieving Californians, but also through its triumphs of research. From better ways to grow tomatoes to the birth of biotech, from viticulture to cancer treatments, UC campuses have been incubators of countless scientific and product breakthroughs that add quality to California life and invigorate its economy. For 15 years in a row, UC has developed more patents than any other university in the country.

This is what's put at risk as state support shrinks. In the end, there are two choices: excellence or mediocrity. While a mediocre UC might cost less in the short term, over time it will enforce on society its own ledger of taxes. Top professors and researchers will begin to drift away, taking with them the best students. Pools of grant money will recede. The engines of invention will sputter.

To those who complain the university has been bloated, wasteful, we say this is a new day. In the last few years, we have seen the institution reform itself. Under a new administration, it is setting new standards for transparency and leadership. We've worked hard to maintain strong bond ratings, cut spending in the Office of the President by \$60 million, and taken additional cost-cutting measures at the campus level. But there is only so much that can be cut. We are no longer chopping at fat and muscle. With the new cuts, as proposed, we soon will be slicing into bone.

And so, there is much at stake and the threat is real. Now is the time for alumni and other supporters and beneficiaries of the University to spread the word that UC excellence must be preserved and nurtured. Please, do whatever you can. Take time to write a letter or an e-mail to your political representatives. Or lend whatever support possible to the UC system or to your preferred campus.

The message – not in just this current crisis, but into the future as well – must be clear: A just-good-enough University of California would not be good enough at all. Mediocrity is not an option. It's time to start fighting back for the UC.

Richard C. Blum, Immediate Past Chair, UC Board of Regents

Russell S. Gould, Chair, UC Board of Regents

Sherry Lansing, Vice Chair, UC Board of Regents

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