

Rebuilding Berkeley

Colleagues,

We meet as a group twice a year. Six months ago, at the Spring Division Meeting, we acknowledged exceptional leaders who were stepping down and exceptional teachers who stepped up. A year ago, at the Fall 2020 Division meeting, it was a time before vaccines and at the height of social distancing. We knew there'd be a different future, but in that moment it was hard to see it.

I've been thinking about how to understand the moment we are in today, asking myself (and some of you) about the opportunities and challenges before us. Sabbaticals bring the opportunity to be refreshed and to gain perspective by time spent in a different place or at least life at a different rhythm. I don't think any of us feels refreshed. But last year our lives did happen in a different place and with a different rhythm. We are returning to campus with new perspectives on what each of us most values about Berkeley. The future of UC Berkeley will be shaped by our individual and collective response to these changes in perspective.

I have come to think of this time as near the end of a slow-moving natural disaster. If we had recently experienced a fire, earthquake, hurricane or tornado, we'd recognize the signs of disaster. We'd have the physical environment as a metric and metaphor for the extent of the disaster. In the immediate aftermath, we'd think about essential services such as electricity and phones. We would quickly shore up some infrastructure to prevent further damage and keep people safe. Longer term, cranes and other signs of reconstruction would be visible and their presence would help us take measure of the recovery.

The challenge and opportunity of a response to a natural disaster is in the choices we would make about how to rebuild. No doubt we would choose to rebuild some buildings, roads and communities almost exactly as they were before. We would also take the devastation as an opportunity to do something better or fairer that leads us in a new direction.

Our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has many of the same elements as a disaster. We mourn the loss of life. We feel the disruption to our families and communities. Our physical infrastructure has not been damaged, but our sense of community was. As we return to campus, it is the people of Berkeley--faculty, staff and students--who invest in this place with their hearts and exceptional minds that make it such a joy to rebuild together. Right now as the disaster begins to recede, we need to shore up our human infrastructure to make it safe for the longer-term rebuilding. We will need to identify which parts of our University to rebuild as they were and where we should start new with fresh ideas.

Another feature of natural disasters is that they can be incredibly uneven in their consequences. Evidence of a need to pay attention to people's different experiences of the last 18 months is all around us. To give just one set of examples, faculty have reported that students in classes that build on scaffolding from high school courses and from our own lower division are less prepared. Learning in some subjects during the last year was less than normal, and that has follow-on consequences for what can be effectively taught this year. Faculty have also reported a level of student engagement, enthusiasm, and a commitment to learning that exceeds expectations. In many classes that outweighs any lack of preparation and learning exceeds the usual expectation. There is an opportunity here if we can use it--to leverage the enthusiasm and to nurture the passion for learning that could be so easily stifled by student's frustration over not having learned key concepts during the only-on-Zoom era. This work is analogous to restoring electricity and providing safe spaces; it is shoring up our intellectual infrastructure while we plan what to rebuild in its original form and what to build differently.

Our research was also upended by this slow-moving disaster. I have made it a point for the last six months to highlight our need to rebalance our research, teaching and service. Our core identity as a faculty and as a University emerges from our search for the next new idea and from our speaking, publishing, performing and our entrepreneurial ventures to engage the world around us with our new ideas. The rhythms we use to generate new ideas, to share them with colleagues and get feedback as we develop them were upended during the pandemic. We learned some new things about how easy it is to collaborate across vast distances. We relearned some old lessons about how important a conversation with a colleague can be to help us move forward with an idea that we are struggling to shape. It is essential that we give our attention to research as we move forward.

Rebuilding our research community is a hidden challenge. Problems faculty are reporting are many and varied and there is not a single potential quick fix. I want to suggest that the fastest way to revitalizing research on our campus will be for each of us to set our own priorities for research a little higher and to make that visible to colleagues and students so they feel emboldened to do the same. This is not easy. It never was. The tension between deadlines like tomorrow's lecture and a creative project that requires time to gestate are ever-present. I remind you that how we do our scholarship is a form of teaching. Faculty are role models for graduate and undergraduate students engaged in research and creative projects. They need to see us engaged with ideas. And they need us to model setting research as a priority among the many deadline-driven items that also command our attention. Raising the priority of research is also something we can do for ourselves as faculty, since research is the passion that brought so many of us to Berkeley.

Let me close with a few words about the agenda today. As we rebuild the University post pandemic one of our core activities is the renewal that occurs by admitting new students, following them into the life of the campus and supporting the arc of their Berkeley journey. We've invited speakers today who are leading campus conversations about recruitment, retention and supporting success for our students. It's not our plan that the conversation touch every topic about students, and we didn't have time to do justice to renewal and support for faculty or staff today. I hope what you hear today sparks continuing dialogue and that you walk away with renewed hope for the bright future we are building together.

Fiat Lux.