



OFFICE OF THE ACADEMIC SENATE
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September 18, 2023

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the Fall Semester of 2023! This letter started off as a “farewell letter” last summer, but since I am continuing as Senate Chair this fall, it can be a welcome letter too. (Along those lines, if this job goes on any longer, I will ask you to refer to me as “Dear Leader” and I will send you a book of my wise sayings that you should carry around with you.)

Our campus and our faculty Senate have been involved in many things this past year, and have much to look forward to as well. I will note a few things here, and hope that they illustrate how our wonderful faculty and the campus community are working together to bring UC Merced success and acclaim.

To start, let me tell you about a recent event that still has me smiling with pride and excitement: Over the summer, I was invited to a meeting with UC President Drake at UCOP (UC Office of the President) in Oakland. I was part of a small group led by our Chancellor, with our goal being to present UC Merced’s accomplishments in the past year. Each campus has their own meeting with the President and his cabinet, and this is the time when the President asks tough questions and determines his level of support for the campus.

Our administrators worked hard to make the best presentation possible, and then made our case to the President. I am happy to tell you that a major focus of their presentation was that our faculty successfully proposed five new majors this academic year, and that our new Honors Program was just approved. As you know, the vast majority of our campus funding comes from enrollment, and the UC overall has assured the state that the UC will take more students, so President Drake is very focused on UC Merced enrolling more students. The opinion of everyone in the room was that new programs at UC Merced are a major key to enrollment growth. These new majors/programs represent concrete and concerted progress toward success in multiple goals, with benefits for everyone from our campus, to the UC system, to the students of California. The smiles around the room after the meeting showed our success, and follow-up meetings (including last week) continue to demonstrate that UCOP supports our campus and our faculty.

As we move forward into the fall semester, there are many other positive things to report. For instance, many college rankings recently were published. We won’t go into detail here, but suffice it to say that there were likely grumbings from *multiple* other UC campuses who found themselves below UC Merced in various rankings for overall quality. And of course, we are almost without peer in terms of social mobility: every student you inspire might very well be the key that pulls an entire California family from poverty to the middle class.

UC Merced of course has its challenges, and the Senate has been working assiduously to address them. Over the summer, members of the Division Council (DivCo) continued to communicate about grant and budget balance issues that are ongoing from the rollout of the Oracle system. Activities in that regard are ratcheting up, with plans to get the various responsible groups (not just Division of Finance and Administration, but also the Office of Research and Economic Development (ORED, who handles grant balances) and the Deans (who supervise the accounting personnel) to sit together and fix the situation. I can assure you, members of DivCo are

highly motivated to keep up the pressure until things are better.

If we are to succeed in achieving R1 status, there are also other obvious clouds on the horizon, such as new graduate student contracts. These have the benefit of giving our trainees a better wage, but we have no new source of funds (aside from a small amount from UCOP) to pay for them. I am sure you have seen that the number of TA slots has been reduced, GSR's have become very expensive, and the expectation for more grant funding in STEM is high. This is of grave concern to several Senate committees, who would appreciate your input as we navigate the issue.

So, a cynical description of the situation would be: High costs have led to a reduction in TA slots, likely leading to more teaching work for both graduate students and professors. Meanwhile, professors will be expected to submit more grant proposals to pay for future graduate students, which means getting more research done and writing more proposals and manuscripts, all while teaching more, with less assistance from graduate students. Some programs will probably significantly reduce graduate admissions due to the lack of clear funding for our 5-year guarantee to the incoming students. And I am sure it is a complete coincidence that departments, schools, and the Senate are having trouble filling slots on committees for essential service work.

With that being said, I want to argue that we should not give in to the cynical argument! I urge you to pause to remember why you decided to join the faculty at UC Merced to begin with. Almost none of us came here because it was "just a job". We came here because we believed in the mission of our growing campus. We are focused on research excellence, and on mentoring students at all levels, training California's next generation of humanists, scientists and engineers. UC Merced opened its doors right before the Great Recession, and faculty pushed forward for years with just 3 academic buildings and some dorms. Now we have a gleaming campus that is so big we almost wish for the good old days when we try to traverse it in 100-degree heat. We started off unknown (even to the other UC campuses, actually) and now are a thriving campus with research success and are a driver of the local economy. We can and will face these challenges and continue to succeed.

Thanks to each of you for your continued work for UC Merced into the new academic year. You are valued and appreciated, and UC Merced needs each of you. I hope you always keep in mind that the faculty Senate exists to represent you, and to serve you and our students. If there is an issue that arises, there is very likely a Senate committee that can help. Please feel free to reach out to me (senatechair@ucmerced.edu) or to the Senate Director, Ms. Fatima Paul (fpaul@ucmerced.edu), so that we can route your issue to the appropriate committee.

With sincere regards,
Patti LiWang
Chair, UC Merced Academic Senate