Faculty Town Hall

May 21, 2020

Chair Hansford welcomed the faculty participating in today’s town hall. He explained that the town hall is being held to clarify uncertainties with regard to reopening the campus in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

EVC/Provost Camfield stated that campus reopening activities will be in compliance with rules established by local, state, and national health authorities. UC Merced is currently collaborating with local health officials. There are two aspects to the campus reopening. The first is research. Relaunching research activities may be easier to do because it involves controlled environments with smaller numbers of people who are used to working with health and safety protocols. The goal is to open research buildings on June 15. However, various conditions have to be met so this should not be considered a hard date. The campus has to do modeling to determine what rate of testing would be necessary for us to monitor any coronavirus outbreaks on campus. It is critical to know how many people to test and how frequently we have to test them. He added that the campus Research Relaunch Work Group is currently working on reopening campus activities.

The second aspect to consider in reopening campus is classroom space. The campus likely will not have in-person, large lectures in order to abide by social distancing rules. He has empaneled a task force on teaching resilience to work on instructional issues. Once faculty have the guidelines for fall instruction in the context of the pandemic, they can examine their curriculum and decide on the modality of their fall courses, either online or in person. If faculty cannot be on campus, the campus will make accommodations for them. EVC/Provost Camfield emphasized that faculty will determine what modality is best for their curriculum. Classrooms will be sanitized for faculty electing to teach in person, and faculty will have the tools they need for remote instruction. EVC/Camfield added that he does not want to harm our students by shifting to total remote instruction, because studies have shown that this modality advantages privileged students who have resources over underprivileged students. But he warned that if there is a surge in coronavirus infection rates, the campus needs to be prepared to immediately transition to remote instruction.

A faculty member asked about the 2020 fall schedule. EVC/Camfield pointed out that some universities plan to end the in-person portion of the fall term by Thanksgiving and hold final exams remotely. That is one of the options UC Merced is considering. He stated that UC Merced will have a hybrid instruction model for fall 2020 and the campus needs to be flexible. He specified that two-thirds to three-fourths of curriculum will be online in the fall semester. He added that the campus is working with UCSF-Fresno and UC Davis to borrow hospital space in those two areas if necessary so that we can assure Merced County that we will not overwhelm local health centers.

A faculty member asked whether they can access their offices on campus. EVC/Provost Camfield replied that faculty should work with their Schools on those logistics.

A faculty member asked for guidance in a scenario in which he has a low-enrollment fall course that can be held in-person, in a classroom on campus, but some students do not want to return to campus. EVC/Camfield answered that students would have a choice to come to campus for instruction or do remote learning. He warned that students may have a lower quality learning experience if they choose to do only remote learning for the entire semester.

In response to a faculty member’s question, EVC/Provost Camfield confirmed that large classrooms that are not being used for in-person instruction in the fall semester can be used for small courses.

EVC/Provost Camfield asserted that he believes the campus should repopulate the student residence halls. Other UC campuses have had many students remain on campus since the sheltering orders were implemented and they have had zero infection rates.

A faculty member expressed concern at the possibility of child care centers and schools not reopening in the fall. If they do not reopen, this will negatively impact faculty’s ability to conduct remote instruction or a hybrid modality of in-person and remote instruction.

A faculty member pointed out that mentorship of graduate students and post docs in the labs is extremely difficult during this time. He asked about the plan for graduate courses in the fall semester. EVC/Provost Camfield agreed that first year graduate students need mentorship because graduate school is a shift in identity for them. He stated that the campus will consider those students a priority when making arrangements for in-person instruction. He added that he trusts that students and faculty will abide by health and safety protocols on campus.

A faculty member mentioned that faculty are assigning TAs to courses and hiring Unit 18 lecturers based on previously-submitted curriculum plans. She asked if faculty can change those curriculum plans even though the modifications to the plans will not align with deadlines for fall 2020 instruction. EVC/Provost Camfield replied that the fall 2020 instruction deadlines are in place partly due to union contracts. The deadlines are also in place to give people leeway to make plans, but there are provisions for last minute changes. He encouraged faculty to take the time to think through their fall instruction plans carefully and not to feel too constrained by pre-set deadlines.

In response to a faculty member’s question, EVC/Provost Camfield confirmed that the campus will provide support for faculty for hybrid instruction.

A faculty member asked if the campus would waive the minimum enrollment requirement given that most courses in the fall will not use university facilities. EVC/Provost Camfield replied that he will consider this and issue a decision.

A faculty member raised the issue of junior faculty delaying their tenure review. EVC/Provost Camfield responded that the campus is allowing any faculty member to opt in to stop the clock for COVID-19 related issues. He added that Merced’s CAP was the first in the UC system to issue a statement about flexibility in faculty advancement and promotion reviews next year. He advised faculty to describe in their self-statements how their productivity was negatively impacted by the pandemic.

A faculty member asked if the fall 2020 schedule can be changed. EVC/Provost Camfield stated that it would be difficult. Chief of Staff Shintaku clarified that the administration would work with department chairs, the Registrar, and other campus constituents to create a list of possibilities and work out the logistics. Currently, the campus is looking into the ability for faculty to hold small courses in large classrooms since large lectures will be held remotely for the fall semester.

EVC/Provost Camfield then gave an update on COVID-19 testing. UC Merced is working with Merced County on a mobile testing unit. The UC system is ramping up testing but CLIA certification needed for testing for diagnostic purposes rather than research purposes. UC Merced faculty are working on obtaining certification. There are logistical challenges, though, such as determining the frequency by which to test people and a courier system for shipping tests and results around the UC campuses.

EVC/Provost Camfield announced that while faculty salary scales will be frozen next year, their raises that result from the normal advancement and promotion process will still occur. There are no imminent plans for furloughs. Plans are contingent on the August revise of the state budget. (Delayed from the traditional May revise, due to the extension of the income tax deadline.)

A faculty member inquired whether international Master’s students could do remote instruction without a visa. EVC/Provost Camfield stated that the Graduate Council of the Academic Senate would have to be consulted. Graduate Council Chair Westerling responded that the UC graduate deans are discussing this possibility. One issue to work out is whether these students have the appropriate technology that would support their remote instruction.

A faculty member asked when the Library would reopen. EVC/Provost Camfield replied that he is having discussions at the systemwide level about the interlibrary loan system coming back. He added that Librarian Haipeng Li is part of the discussions to reopen the Library. He understands that many faculty rely on Library resources to do their research. He also reminded faculty to work with the Schools if they need to access their campus offices to get their books.