

Utopian pasts and futures

Inaugural address of UC Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks, as prepared for delivery.

Introduction

On November 8th, 2012, then-President Mark Yudof announced my selection as the 10th Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley.

Exactly one year later, I take on the mantle of Chancellor in the traditional ceremony of investiture.

I thank the President, the members of the search committee and the Regents of the University of California for their confidence in me.

It is now my great privilege and honor to accept this high responsibility, and to pledge my service to one of the greatest institutions of higher education and the finest public research university in the world today.

I am joined in today's inauguration ceremony by our new University of California President, Janet Napolitano, by representatives of the Regents, of the faculty, staff, students and alumni of UC Berkeley.

I am joined as well by visiting dignitaries of the State of California, and distinguished delegates from our many sister institutions across the State, the country and beyond, who have come to extend their good wishes to me and to express their regard for our great university.

Thank you all for your presence here today and your warm support.

I have been sustained in my life journey by love and support of family. I am especially proud and grateful to share this special day with my colleague and wife, Janaki Bakhle, who moved with me here to Berkeley to take up a position as Professor in the departments of History and South and Southeast Asian studies.

I am so pleased to be surrounded by family: our son, Ishan, and my daughter, Sandhya, my mother, my brothers and sister, my mother-in-law, brother-in-law and other close family members.

My father who was a professor of religious studies at Yale and, for most of the 1970s, Vice Chancellor of the Humanities at UC Santa Cruz, and my father-in-law, who passed away earlier this year, are here with us in spirit.

Ceremonial occasions mark transitions and launch new beginnings, even as they afford an opportunity to reflect on our history and pay tribute to the noble association of men and women, past and present, who believed in this extraordinary idea, and created and led this great university.

I want especially to recognize and thank two of my predecessors who are here with us today, Chancellors Emeritus Robert Berdahl and Robert Birgeneau, who did so much to sustain the reality of access and excellence at Berkeley over the past decades.

Although I have made my journey here to Berkeley late in life, after a career spent in institutions across the country and scholarship around the world, I have never felt more at home.

In the goals I will propose for my time here, I will seek to connect the many strands of my own upbringing, experience and belief to the deepest and most resolute commitments of this great institution.

I grew up in a household where universities were never far away, and yet with the keen awareness that for my father, the university was always a strange and wondrous thing. He had grown up on a farm in Iowa and only learned English in a one-room schoolhouse.

He went to college because his damaged heart could not sustain the physical labor of the farm, and only went on from a local college to Columbia for his Ph.D. because of the accidental awakening of his intellect in Dubuque.

Yet, even after many happy years at Yale, he found his highest institutional calling at one of the campuses of the University of California. He had previously taken me (and my family) to India when I was 12, in another journey that changed my life, opening up my early sense of the vastness and difference of the world, creating an intellectual, cultural, and, yes, personal counterpoint for my life ever since. He took me to the Yale library to do research on term papers while also taking me to the Yale chapel to hear William Sloan Coffin recount the travails and struggles of Selma, Alabama, or preach about Martin Luther King's strategy of civil disobedience.

I was fortunate to have an extraordinary undergraduate education at Wesleyan, where I took advantage of a deep institutional commitment to the liberal arts and interdisciplinary studies, while also receiving support to return to India to do advanced research. As a graduate student in Chicago, I continued to study across a wide range of disciplines while engaging India much more profoundly, emerging as unsure of my own true discipline as I was certain that I wanted to create similar interdisciplinary opportunities for other students. I went on from Chicago to Caltech, the University of Michigan, and Columbia, all institutions that expanded my own intellectual horizons far more than I did theirs, all the while cementing my belief in the paramount importance of the university for our society as well as for ourselves.

I stand before you now as Chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley with great humility but also with confident conviction that we combine the best of those institutions while affording even greater access to a more diverse group of students, faculty and staff, and providing even more in the way of commitment to a public mission than any other university in the world. Our excellence, our vitality and our value endure as a direct consequence of these attributes, not despite them; I am determined that this will always be so.

The task ahead

Today, as the nation and our state emerge from years of financial calamity, from a time that has witnessed a massive and unprecedented level of disinvestment in public higher education, it is clear that Berkeley has managed to do far more than simply weather the storm. Given all we have been through, it is tempting simply to celebrate our survival and carry on as we always have. Yet, as I have heard in countless conversations over the past months with members of our community — students, faculty, staff and alumni — there is a palpable commitment to doing more, not just to follow our time-honored predispositions to challenge the status quo and reject conventional thinking but to build on our past by reimagining the future. I am convinced that, together, we can and must take advantage of an unparalleled moment of possibility, for public higher education and for this institution in particular.

I believe that Berkeley is positioned not just to counter skepticism but to rebuild public faith in the value of education. As we confront the most complex and daunting global challenges, we have the opportunity to re-envision the American research university as a public enterprise, by which I mean on the foundation of time-tested values and a deep belief that our individual fates as Californians, Americans and global citizens are inextricably bound together. None of us can do this alone; it is imperative that we marshal all of our resources and address all of our constituencies, in government and outside, to re-invigorate the ties that bind us to the public we serve.

And we must do this by re-invoking the utopian ideals that have animated the entire history of this great institution.

I begin today by refusing to frame the paramount challenges before us in what have become normative terms.

I resist the stark divide between teaching and research, between general and professional education, between basic and applied research, between the arts and the sciences, between private interest and public good, between our local obligations and our global ambitions, between disciplinary specialization and multidisciplinary collaboration, between our commitments to access and diversity and to intellectual excellence, between the goals of a college and the aspirations of a university.

I believe that the American university became as successful as it did precisely because it combined these features rather than sealing them off from each other. I hold that the kinds of intellectual and moral challenges that are part of undergraduate education in the liberal arts and sciences are critical to the formulation and defense of the very idea of the university. I hold that the role of the faculty in shared governance provides a model for all of higher education at a time when the university as a viable institution for the future is so seriously being questioned. I hold that the university serves a public mission and that the education we provide is a public good. I hold that the research we do not only makes for better products, medicines, technologies and policies, but also a better education, for a broader public. I hold that a great public institution both provides leadership in confronting our greatest challenges and produces leaders who will most

successfully address them in the years ahead. I hold that the university best serves its immediate public by acknowledging that we not only provide a global model, but the most successful example of a genuinely global institution.

And I hold that these core commitments in fact provide the most secure ground on which we, as a university, as a society and as individuals, can respond to the prevailing loss of public confidence in the basic value of education and the efficacy of public endeavors. It is from this base we can, and will, lead this campus to a new era of promise and possibility.

In order to re-envision the future for a great public research university, I believe that we must expand and revise our understanding of each of Berkeley's primary mission elements: teaching, research and public service.

In each area I have identified the need for a comprehensive initiative, together forming a set of three inter-connected pillars upon which we will build during my first years as Chancellor.

They are: undergraduate education, the global university and innovation in basic and applied research across the disciplines. I will describe these initiatives as pillars precisely to support our public calling and our enduring commitment to change the world. First, however, since I am, after all, a scholar of the past, I will set all of this in the context of the history and traditions of this extraordinary institution.

History of the University

I follow a long line of leaders who never lost faith in the bold vision that created the University of California 145 years ago.

It was to be a “complete” university, combining the dream of a New England college transplanted in the West, with the idea that this new Western university had to be oriented toward practical pursuits and science as well as moral education. The new University's first inaugural address was given by Daniel Coit Gilman in 1872, who reaffirmed Abraham Lincoln's sentiments in tribute to the Morrill Act — to say “It is ‘of the people and for the people’ — not in any low or unworthy sense, but in the highest and noblest relations to their intellectual and moral well-being.”

The rich traditions of the East were blended with the expansive vigor and true grit of the West as Yale blue... was joined to... California gold.

The University grew to become an exceptional center of learning, quickly recognized for its academic excellence as a peer of the great universities of the East. From 1870, only two years after the opening of our doors, women were included in the student body, as were an increasing number of students from foreign lands. A city of intellect took shape on this hill, with the Greek Theatre, Boalt Hall, Doe Library, the Campanile and Sather Gate constructed with the help of local benefactors who sought to ensure the monumental durability of this great idea.

By 1910, the university was well known for cultivating mechanics and metaphysics with equal success. By 1934, the American Council of Education found that the University of California had as many distinguished graduate departments as any other university in the nation. In the years after World War II, the University propelled the growth of Northern California as one of the most important centers of innovation, discovery and economic growth for the nation.

At this propitious moment, the University named as Chancellor one of the nation's greatest leaders of higher education, Clark Kerr.

Clark Kerr

Clark Kerr was the first to identify what he called the “multi-versity” in his extraordinary Godkin Lectures of 1963 and to expound within it a vision of universal access and commitment to the fullest possible realization of individual talent. His Master Plan for Higher Education, adopted in 1960, was the greatest organizational idea for public higher education in the 20th century. The plan legitimated the concentration of research and high performing students in its flagship institutions while making the system of education — from community colleges across the state to the Berkeley campus, which was by then Harvard's peer — integrated in an unprecedented way, an institutional reflection of American democratic ideals joined with the twin values of excellence and merit.

Speaking at his inauguration, Kerr noted, “The university's responsibility is not met in full by the education of successive student bodies, or by provision of myriad public services. These constitute the core of its activity, but do not exhaust its obligation. The university plays its highest role and meets its most profound obligation by its contributions to the moral and intellectual life.” Six years later, as President of the system and on the threshold of great expansion and rapid growth, he reaffirmed that as the university prepared for a future that in his words could create a golden age for mankind, it was of paramount importance that an intellectual and moral vision guide the great values that knowledge should be made to serve.

The future of the University

By 1963, Kerr was confident enough to announce that the “American university is ...undergoing its second great transformation”... a transformation, he noted, that “will cover roughly the quarter-century after World War II. The university is being called upon to educate previously unimagined numbers of students; to respond to the expanding claims of national service; to adapt to and re-channel new intellectual currents. By the end of this period, there will be a truly American university, an institution unique in world history, an institution not looking to other models but serving, itself, as a model for universities in other parts of the globe.” He was prophetic, and played a foundational role in the creation of the success of this global model.

And yet, reflecting on these same questions some 40 years later, long after he had been challenged by the Free Speech Movement and then brought down by the collision of political forces in the California of the 1960s, Kerr acknowledged that his was still less

than a golden age. He worried that the master plan survived only in diminished degree, undermined both by the tensions between teaching at the undergraduate level and advanced research, and the unprecedented competition for public resources. And yet, 13 years into the new millennium, I confess to a certain nostalgia for the very time that alarmed him the most.

Kerr cogently identified issues and challenges that have only intensified, and in dramatic ways, over the intervening years. It is hard to know what he would have said if he knew that in the year I have assumed the Chancellorship, only 12 percent of our budget comes from the state, down from 35 percent in 2001.

If we are to follow the real spirit of Clark Kerr, however, I believe that we must look to the future, and insist on his relentlessly utopian vision, which must continue to guide us as we chart our way through a growing host of difficulties and obstacles.

Even as I speak today about my plan to re-envision the great American university, I readily confess to my own streak of utopianism, acknowledging that utopian ideals are about the values that we profess and act upon rather than the realities of institutional life, which will always and inevitably be flawed, ever subject to our recognition of the incompleteness of our mission: our need to do better, reach further and achieve more.

My first pillar: Undergraduate education, the liberal arts and sciences

The belief that the liberal arts and sciences should be central to undergraduate education rests on a distinctively American idea, one that was originally rooted in classical and religious education. For many years, this belief has taken on the form of a commitment that our students engage fundamental human debates, dilemmas and discourses, both as the means to develop critical thinking and for the purpose of becoming active citizens of our world.

Today, however, there are many who proclaim the irrelevance, waste, or danger of this kind of education, even as there are those who contest the importance of citizenship and even the idea of a public sphere. Many doubt that it might still be important for our students to wrestle with Aristotle on the good life, Confucius on public ethics, Locke and Marx on the origins of property, Jefferson and de Tocqueville on the nature of democracy, Darwin on human evolution, Du Bois on the legacy of slavery, Gandhi on the humiliations of empire, or de Beauvoir on the making of women. I am still inspired by the magic of an early class I took on “free will and necessity,” in which I participated in a semester-long debate between theories of freedom and human agency on the one hand and experimental evidence from biological and social psychology on the other that confounds me to the present day.

I believe that the literary and artistic imagination is more important than ever for us to cultivate, especially given our growing reliance on science and technology not just to design our relationship to the lived environment but also to reshape and redefine our relationships with the economy, society and even our physical bodies. And I believe that

all of our students need to engage with past and present debates and discoveries in the sciences in order to engage directly with the most pressing issues of our day.

In this age of economic turmoil, government debt and growing disenchantment with many of our public institutions, however, the education we offer has come under greater scrutiny than ever before. Given the rapidly escalating cost of higher education, this scrutiny is not only warranted, it is necessary.

The arguments I have just made depend upon ensuring that all of our youth have proper access to a university education and genuine assurances about the actual affordability of college. When students graduate with debt and uncertain job prospects, it is small wonder that we are being asked to measure the literal value of a degree in the form of jobs and earnings. The liberal arts now often seem to be a luxury that only the elite can afford, and even they seem increasingly skeptical. The challenge before us, however, is as great as the future of democracy itself, the character of the public sphere, the extent of our imagination and the nature of our vision. These in truth are not luxuries, but the fundamental conditions for a good life, a just society, a productive economy, a functioning political system and a sustainable planet.

We will not be able to generate sufficient resources to preserve our university, to secure more funding from the state and greater support from our alumni and donors (and let me be clear, we need to do both), if we do not find ways to defend the importance of both our public and our intellectual mission. We must not be preoccupied by internal quarrels or lose our resolve. We must find new ways to tell our story, while exemplifying the extent to which a public institution still inspires trust as well as commitment. And, in my view, we must place undergraduate education at the very center of our research university.

We will accordingly do even more to provide extraordinary opportunities for our undergraduates. We should not tire of celebrating the fact that we educate as many Pell grant recipients as the entire Ivy League combined. And yet we must support and expand this diversity through more financial aid, better advising and more capacious student services. We must also pay constant and comprehensive attention to our undergraduate curriculum, the centerpiece of the liberal education we offer that is one of the most important charges of the faculty and the university. We need to find ways to connect students more vitally not just to the intellectual opportunities on the campus, but to the faculty, as well as to graduate students who serve as mentors as well as teachers.

We must build on the enormous success of our freshman and sophomore seminars, our Big Ideas courses, innovative new initiatives such as the Berkeley Connect program, our extraordinary majors, the Smart Program, which involves graduate students in teaching and learning. We need to ensure that all of our students have opportunities to connect to research work in laboratories as well as libraries, in projects ranging across the full spectrum of research programs including in our local communities, to study and do research abroad just as I did.

The second pillar: The global university

UC Berkeley for years has been global in its interests, its connections, its teaching, and its scholarship. Its first endowed chair, gifted in 1872 by Edward Tompkins, was the Agassiz Professorship of Oriental Languages and Literatures. Berkeley was one of the first universities to foster research in and teaching about South Asia of the sort that made possible the education I received and the scholarly life I pursued. We have unique resources for global study, but we are also in a unique position to lead the way toward creating a new global ecosystem for a more extensive engagement with the world. This has never been more important, since the level and pace of global interconnectedness has never been greater. Beyond the continuing need for global literacy, we need to educate our students in ways that will prepare them to pursue careers and lives that will inevitably reflect the growing significance and reach of globalization.

Berkeley, with its combination of global knowledge and its strong commitment to change the world for the better, has an unmatched ability to make a real difference on a global scale. We have an interdisciplinary philosophy that provides a potent base for engaging the most complex global issues: poverty, inequality, public health, climate change, sustainable sources of energy, the understanding of cultural and political conflicts. These challenges recognize no national borders and can only be addressed by approaches that accept no academic boundaries.

While the U.S. questions both the public and private good represented by education and research at the highest levels, many others in the world, in Asia and across the globe, are seeking partnerships with U.S. universities to establish their own educational infrastructure in ways directly modeled on our success. We must neither give up what others have recognized as our signature strength, nor fail to appreciate the extraordinary opportunities of the present moment.

At Berkeley, we are well positioned for new globally based collaborations and initiatives, from our joint ventures in Shanghai and Singapore to the Pakistan initiative and our work in the Blum Center for Developing Economies. But here, too, we can do more, through the establishment of what I think of as a set of “consular” offices in key regions of the globe where we can connect our faculty, our students, our alumni, and our staff with new kinds of global activities, networks and projects.

We will have to discuss and debate a range of issues central to the enhancement of our global footprint in the 21st century, including the challenges of different national environments for issues around academic freedom as well as political and human rights, the need to rethink the academic and disciplinary structures that organize the university, the role of online education, the nature of collaboration, authorship and institutional affiliation, the importance of knowing multiple languages and our very relationship to the State of California. We will address the greater good on a global scale for a global public.

Innovation in research across the disciplines

Berkeley has long been one of the most innovative centers for research in both the basic and the applied sciences. We established the first seismology station in the Western Hemisphere, developed the flu vaccine and nuclear medicine, crystallized the virus for polio, founded the first biotech firm, assembled the world's largest telescope, found new planets and new elements and determined that the universe is accelerating.

Berkeley faculty played major roles in the development of large collaborations — in civil engineering around the construction of bridges, dams, and buildings, in physics through the work of Ernest Lawrence in developing the first cyclotron, and in fields as various as paleontology, linguistics, molecular evolution, and genomics. Our ongoing work in areas such as computing, nanoscience, energy biosciences and big data continues this tradition of leadership in innovation and research that bridges theoretical and applied fields as well as multiple disciplines. And we are about to launch an ambitious new agenda for neuroscience, as well. Our history of innovation is equally vested in the humanities and social sciences, for example in the work that was done here to develop the field of new historicism and that was first disseminated through the journal *Representations*, through path-breaking accomplishments in fields ranging from medical anthropology to behavioral economics, in areas spanning the performing arts and the applied social sciences.

And yet, we are confronting not just the dire effects of diminished support for research from the state, but the increasing pressure on federal and foundation budgets especially for basic research. While we know that basic research often leads to unexpected findings for medical and technical advances, and that applied research in turn leads to new conceptual understandings, we also know that the current funding environment may ironically deter the very innovation, risk taking and collaboration that have been so much a feature of this institution. I will find new forms of support to encourage continued innovation across fields and areas of research, ensure that the research environment bridges different units of the university, not just within the extraordinary range of work in the basic sciences, but from engineering to the arts, from natural resources to the information sciences and from business to social welfare.

Our graduate students are critical to our research mission, and I will work to find better support for them. At the same time, we need to ensure that all of our undergraduates as well, whatever their programs and whatever their majors, should build research into their education, so that the value of studying in a research university is made real, and the skill of advanced research becomes one of the signal ingredients of all of the degrees we offer.

Initiatives

I have just outlined some of the most significant challenges before us as we seek to prepare our university for the bold new world ahead. Over the course of the next few months, I will be announcing and launching a set of university-wide initiatives designed to advance these agendas on the Berkeley campus and beyond. I will chair a task force on undergraduate education that will focus attention on three areas: how we can support and expand our considerable achievements in diversity, how we can evaluate and strengthen

our undergraduate curriculum and how we can find ways to connect and support student life more comprehensively.

I will be working with our extended campus community to determine the steps we can take to design a new global plan for our university. And in working with our community to promote and sponsor our innovation in research, I will pay special attention to the role of the new Richmond Bay Campus in providing the space for new developments, partnerships and opportunities.

The three pillars I have described will by no means exhaust the full range of initiatives I plan to undertake. I will, for example, be convening another university-wide committee to establish a vision for the arts at Berkeley, to ensure that all of our students gain a grounded experience of the arts.

We know that we are at the dawn of a new era in the use of technology for educational purposes: I will bring together the extraordinary resources and initiatives already on campus to engage our community in a consideration of what is possible and what is desirable, the opportunities and the risks of new technologies, the issues that arise around both how the faculty teach and students learn. And finally, in an age when the challenges to affirmative action mount and the political commitment to ensuring diversity is being whittled away by referenda and court challenges, I will engage our campus in finding new ways to reflect the rich ethnic, racial, cultural and socio-economic tapestry of our state — African American, Native American, Latino, documented and undocumented alike, among us — at every level and in every part of the university.

Conclusion

We have just celebrated our 22nd Nobel Prize, awarded to cell biologist Randy Schekman, our first faculty member to win the prize in physiology and medicine. His work exemplifies the importance of basic research, while showing that such research can have life-saving applications. Randy recently announced that he is donating his Nobel award money to found a chair in cancer research here. He is one of so many citizens of this extraordinary university who demonstrate over and over again the reality of their commitment to a greater good.

Also sitting with us are Berkeley students, staff members and alums who exemplify the ethos of this campus. Rosemary Hua, an undergraduate student, set up a partnership with colleagues in Ghana to establish a volunteer program in which Berkeley students go to Ghana to build schools. Fermin Reygadas, a Ph.D. student, won a Big Ideas award for work he has been doing to create ultraviolet water treatments for households in Mexico. Lorena Valdez was a first-generation college student here, her parents immigrants from Mexico. After graduation she stayed, to give back. Today Lorena directs the program she built, our pioneering Transfer Student Services program, which assists and supports the thousands of transfers students on the Berkeley campus. Meng So, another Berkeley alum, returned to campus to be the first coordinator of our undocumented student program; he fled the Khmer Rouge genocide and spent his first 12 years in this country without legal status. Meng's program has become a national model, and he is at the

University of Michigan today, sharing his work on undocumented students. And there are countless others who have grappled with intellectual and moral challenges in Berkeley classrooms only to leave here with a commitment to changing the world.

This is why I am unreservedly enthusiastic about our future. This is why I believe that now is the time for us not just to preserve and protect Berkeley's past record of accomplishment, but also to work together to do more.

The brilliant and accomplished scholars on our faculty, our exceptionally talented and committed students, our deeply loyal and hard-working staff and our proud and distinguished alumni are a global testament to the spirit and vision of the people of California who imagined the utopian ideal of a great public university.

I invite you now to join me in a collective effort to imagine new futures for this great institution. The stakes for us are as high as our aspirations. To preserve democracy, to maintain the ideal of the public good, to elevate and sustain the intellectual and moral compass that must guide our future — these are our utopian goals. Together, here, now, we are all utopians. Fiat Lux.