

**Cristina González**

**The University of California at the Crossroads:  
Legislative Control, Popular Clamor, and Academic Leadership**

**UC Davis 101:  
An Open Seminar for UC Davis Students, Faculty and Staff**

**Tuesday, February 7, 2012, 4:30-6:30p.m.  
3 Kleiber Hall**

**Presentation Outline**

In 1875, President Gilman stated that “however well we may build up the University of California, its foundations are unstable, because it is dependent on legislative control and popular clamor.”

Legislative control and popular clamor are powerful forces, and they are very important at all public universities around the country.

But there is a third important force, and that is academic leadership. The history of the University of California, and of all public universities, is the history of a struggle among legislative control, popular clamor and academic leadership.

Leadership does matter.

One reason why the University of California has achieved such high level of distinction is because it has had extraordinarily good leaders at key moments of its development. And these leaders were good precisely because they understood legislative control and popular clamor and knew how to deal with them. They knew when it was time to fight these forces and when it was time to tap them to advance the mission of the University.

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Let’s review a few historical examples of good academic leadership, starting at the very beginning.

In 1850, two years after the discovery of gold, California became a state, which resulted in an immediate desire to create a state university. This aspiration, however, did not come to fruition until 1868, when the College of California, which was a private school, was given public funds and transformed into the University of California.

The College of California had a president, Henry Durant, who later became President of the University of California (1870-1872). He is the first example of good academic leadership.

Durant, who was a Yale University scholar, was a visionary leader. His vision was very simple. He thought that a place as prosperous as California needed a university of the quality of the Ivy League, and that is what he was trying to accomplish with his College of California.

Committed to this vision, Durant insisted that the new University of California should be what he called a "complete university," that is, not a vocational school but a school with strong arts and sciences and the highest levels of academic excellence. At that time, there were powerful forces advocating a vocational school approach for the University of California, but Durant fought those forces and won.

The second example is Daniel Coit Gilman (1872-1875). Gilman followed Durant in the presidency and had exactly the same problems. The forces advocating a vocational school approach for the University of California were even more powerful at this time, and Gilman had to fight very hard to defend the idea of the University of California as a research university.

Gilman had significant political problems and left the state thinking that he was losing the battle. He won, in fact, but he didn't know that at the time--an example of the principle that visionary leaders sometimes have to pay a political price for their visions, even when those visions prevail in the end.

Durant and Gilman are examples of academic leaders who fought the forces of legislative control and popular clamor. The second two examples are of leaders who tapped those forces to advance the mission of the university.

The first is President Benjamin Ide Wheeler (1899-1919), who led the university during the "Progressive Era." Many people during that period wanted a more egalitarian society and were very much in favor of greater access to higher education. Wheeler understood these forces, realized that there was an opportunity to transform the university into a first-rate research university and proceeded to do so. That is when the University of California, which at that time had only one campus--Berkeley--became really famous, joining Harvard, Yale and other Ivy League schools at the top of the national rankings. What Wheeler did was to tap the forces of legislative control and popular clamor to advance the mission of the university.

The second example of a leader who tapped those forces is Clark Kerr, who was president in the 1960s (1958-1967), another progressive era. Kerr used the forces of legislative control and popular clamor to articulate the California Master Plan for Higher Education, which was approved in 1960. This was really revolutionary because it promised universal access to higher education. What the Master Plan did was to tell the people of the state that anyone and everyone who wanted to go to college could find a

place in the educational system. There would a spot at UC, CSU or the community colleges for all California residents who wanted access to higher education. That was the promise of the Master Plan.

The Master Plan was very clear in terms of who went where. For example, the top 12.5% of high school graduates would go to UC. The Master plan also established a clear division of labor, according to which UC would be in charge of research and doctoral education.

This division of labor resulted in the idea that all UC campuses would be research universities. Kerr understood the possibilities of this arrangement and proceeded to shape the structure of the University of California around the concept of systemic excellence. That is what is new, different and unique about the University of California. It is not a campus, but a system, a true system that has very high standards of quality both for faculty and students.

Faculty members follow the same promotion, tenure and merit requirements on all ten campuses, and they are demanding requirements, with pre-tenure and post-tenure evaluations of faculty members every two or three years. This rigorous process, overseen by the academic senate, has kept faculty members unusually motivated and productive. The students also have to perform at a superior level. They must meet UC-eligibility rules to be considered for admission, and those rules are demanding. So both faculty and students are subject to very high standards of quality that are universal for the entire UC system.

The idea of systemic excellence was a breakthrough, a revolution, because it provided access to higher education to an extent never achieved before. Not only could all residents of California attend college, but those who did well could enter the UC system, which was the best university system in the world.

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Now that we have reviewed some examples about the importance of academic leadership in shaping the forces of legislative control and popular clamor, let's return to the present.

The reason we are here today is because we had some problems last fall--student protests that were not handled in the best manner. That has made us realize that we need to think both about the past and about the future of the university. We need to think about where to go from here, what to do next.

*I think that the most important issue facing the UC leadership at present is whether to oppose forces demanding greater social equality or to tap them to advance the mission of the university.*

*One reason why student protests on the various UC campuses last fall were historically significant is that the administration appeared to be fighting these forces, rather than tapping them.*

*My own impression was that the administration had given up on the possibility of ever obtaining proper public funding and had focused, instead, on privatization. Busy trying to raise funds for the university, the administration, in my view, did not pay sufficient attention to the student protests, which it appeared to regard as an annoying side show, rather than a sign of historical change.*

*In my opinion, the student protests signified the birth of a new progressive era, and progressive eras are very good for the university.*

*I believe that this is not a moment to fight legislative control and popular clamor, but rather to draw upon those forces to advance the mission of the University of California, which is, and always has been, to provide access to the best available education to the people of the Golden State.*

### **Background readings**

Flexner, Abraham (1946). *Daniel Coit Gilman: Creator of the American Type of University*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.

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**Cristina González** (Ph.D. Indiana University) is Professor of Spanish and Professor of Education at the University of California, Davis, and an affiliated faculty member of the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Her

research and teaching have focused on Hispanic literature and culture, as well as on education policy and governance, educational leadership, history of higher education, history of the University of California and diversity and inclusiveness issues. Dr. González has served as department chair, graduate dean and senior advisor to the chancellor and has been a member of various national higher education committees. Dr. González's articles on higher education have appeared in such journals as *Science*, *Academe*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Women in Higher Education*, and *Journal of Hispanics in Higher Education*. Her book *Clark Kerr's University of California: Leadership, Diversity and Planning in Higher Education* was recently released by Transaction Publishers. Dr. González can be reached at [crigonza@ucdavis.edu](mailto:crigonza@ucdavis.edu).