Re: Senate Review of Campus Climate Reports

Dear Chris,

At the CODI discussions on September 27, 2012, I volunteered to get Academic Senate input to the UCOP Campus Climate Reports. Per our process, on October 11, 2012, I asked the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF), the Committee on Diversity and Equal Opportunity (CODEO), the Graduate Council, and the Undergraduate Council to review the matter. When an item such as this is sent to multiple Senate committees for review, typically the Executive Board of the Academic Senate reviews all responses and then formulates its own response, which becomes the position of the Academic Senate. We scheduled these responses to be submitted to our office by December 7, 2012 so that we could discuss these at our December 13, 2012 Executive Board Meeting. The Graduate and Undergraduate Councils responded (see attached) and CAF and CODEO did not submit responses, and requested more time to consider the matter.

However, given my brief hallway conversation with you on December 13, 2012, in which you reported to me that administrators in UCOP have taken certain steps which obviated the need for further review, I questioned the need for a formal report from the Senate. I shared your communication at our December 13, 2012 Executive Board meeting. We decided to forward the responses that we received (attached) without further comment, and to suspend Academic Senate review of the matter. We therefore will not create or submit an official Senate report. For that same reason, I informed CODEO and CAF (through staff) that the extra time they requested was not necessary as we would not be preparing a report from the Executive Board. I am advising CODEO and CAF that they are free, at their own discretion, to continue deliberation on the reports should they so choose and that they may submit opinions directly to you.

Please share these comments with the appropriate body at systemwide. We are hopeful that Senate involvement in the upcoming Climate survey will be helpful in providing data about a range of issues and direction regarding how to ensure a healthy campus climate.

Please do not hesitate to contact me, should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Linda Sarna
Chair, Academic Senate

Cc: Jaime R. Balboa, Academic Senate CAO
Andrew Leuchter, Immediate Past Chair, Academic Senate
Janice Reiff, Vice Chair, Academic Senate
Joseph Nagy, Graduate Council Chair
Troy Carter, Undergraduate Council Chair
Francisco Ramos-Gomez, Chair of CODEO
David Teplow, Chair, CAF
At its meetings on November 9 and 30, 2012, the Graduate Council reviewed the two campus climate reports representing the Jewish and Arab-Muslim student communities in the University of California. The Graduate Council recognizes the amount of time and work that the reports’ authors expended to produce the recommendations, appreciates their efforts on behalf of the University of California, and endorses the spirit of their recommendations.

The Council supports all efforts that enable all students to feel safe, respected, and valued within the University of California community, and it recognizes that some groups may feel more marginalized and misunderstood than others. No doubt, on an international scale, both reports are very timely and help to frame centuries-old debates that continue today. On a local scale, the Graduate Council supports any work that helps to dispel any perceptions of marginalization on the basis of national, ethnic and religious identity, and it encourages the on-going dialogue between the student body, faculty, and Administration to ensure as inclusive and respectful a campus community as possible.

To quote the UC Diversity Statement: The knowledge that the University of California is open to qualified students from all groups, and thus serves all parts of the community equitably, helps sustain the social fabric of the State.

The Council considers such a statement to embrace the underlying principles of the campus community reports. While encouraging the University to move forward in a caring and responsible fashion, there are members who believe that a more thorough assessment based on a less selective survey of potentially affected communities should be undertaken before recommendations are drawn up and considered for adoption.

Thank you for the opportunity to opine on this matter.

cc:   Jaime Balboa, Chief Administrative Officer, Academic Senate
      Linda Mohr, Assistant CAO, Academic Senate
      Kyle Cunningham, Policy Analyst, Graduate Council
      Dorothy Ayer, Policy Analyst, Academic Senate
December 7, 2012

To: Professor Linda Sarna, Chair
Academic Senate

From: Professor Troy Carter, Chair
Undergraduate Council

Re: Undergraduate Council Response to the Campus Climate Reports

The Undergraduate Council considered the Campus Climate Reports (CCRs) during its meetings on November 16, 2012 and December 7, 2012. The Council feels that the reports contain many useful observations and some good recommendations. Unfortunately, however, they are premised on a flawed (if well-intended) misunderstanding of religion as well as its relationship to politics.

The CC review was undertaken partly in response to several incidents in which supporters of Israel and supporters of Palestinian rights clashed on UC campuses. Unfortunately, the President and the Advisory Council repeatedly commit the error of equating support for Israel (a political position) with Judaism (a religion), and support for Palestinian rights (a political position) with Islam (a religion). Obviously, faith and politics often overlap. But in assuming (most of the time) that they are fully congruent, the report tacitly endorses the kind of identity politics we should be trying to diffuse.

As the Jewish Student CCR notes, many students who identify as Jewish also identify strongly with Israel (p. 6). However, as the report itself also notes (pp. 3 and 4), many Jewish students and faculty are critical of Israeli policy. (Conversely, some of the strongest supporters of Israel in the United States are not Jews but evangelical Christians.) It is also true that many supporters of Palestinian rights are Muslims, but many others are Jewish, Christian, or religiously unaffiliated. (Not all Palestinians are Muslims, either, nor are all Arabs: two points that might usefully have been noted in the CCRs.)

For these reasons, we should never assume a complete correlation between religious affiliation and political convictions. More broadly, demonstrations of political conviction should be regulated by the mechanisms that already exist for addressing concerns about free speech and civility; they should not be confused with expressions of, or attacks on, religious belief. If advocates of particular positions want to conflate faith and politics, they are free to do so, but we do not think the University should take that equation at face value. Most importantly, the University cannot protect demonstrators – or those who observe demonstrations – from the psychological consequences of being confronted with people who disagree with them.

Second, the Campus Climate documents are based on a simplistic understanding of religious identity. Faith, or religious affiliation, is not exclusive or immutable. A person may identify with more than one tradition, or embrace some parts of a tradition while questioning or rejecting others, or reject
one tradition in favor of another while still being perceived as an adherent of the first. For these reasons, it seems heavy-handed and condescending for us to take surveys of religious affiliation, especially since the respondents – college students – are precisely at the age when many are trying to decide what they believe in. Similarly, we doubt the wisdom of such expedients as “[ensuring] that all local campus climate councils include Jewish and other religious minority student representatives” (JSCCR, p. 10). Should the Jewish representative (for example) be Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or something else? Who would appoint her, and who would decide whether she has faithfully represented the Jewish community on a particular campus? Similarly, should the Muslim representative be a Sunni or a Shiite? One who wears a head covering or one who doesn’t? Is she allowed to express her own opinion, or must she represent the “Muslim view” on every issue?

A similar objection can be raised to the call for accommodating Muslim and Jewish students’ requests for prayer spaces, ritually acceptable meals, and the like. By placing a masjid (prayer space) or kosher eatery on campus, the university will in effect be and facilitating judgments that identify certain individuals as insufficiently observant. If, for example, the university designates a space for use as a masjid, every student who walks by at prayer time must decide whether to pray or not. For many students, the decision would be easy; but for those struggling with questions of belief and practice, it may not be. Forcing such students to make a public declaration of religious conviction – or lack of same – seems an unwelcome intrusion into matters of conscience.

Finally, the Campus Climate Reports, in calling for respect and affirmation for people of faith, overlook the extent to which religious traditions can be coercive and judgmental. To respect and affirm them implies (if only logically) disrespecting and denigrating other ways of being in the world. What if you belong to the 16% of UC respondents who call themselves atheist or an agnostic (MASCC, p. 2) and you find supernatural claims to authority offensive to your sense of rationality? Don’t atheists and agnostics – not to mention gay people, who have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of religious zealots everywhere – also, have a right to respect and affirmation? If we believe they do, it is difficult to support special consideration for any particular belief systems.

All of us have the right to express our opinions without being threatened, intimidated, or isolated. Equally, though, all of us must take responsibility for what happens when we decide to live by certain beliefs. For some Jewish and Muslim students, these consequences include finding a place to pray, bringing food from home, and being challenged by people who disagree with them. We question whether a public institution designed to promote intellectual development and the values associated with it has any responsibility to mitigate those consequences.

In addition to the above over-arching comments, the Council has comments on specific recommendations:

Policy Recommendations

- “Adopt a UC definition of anti-Semitism and identify examples of anti-Semitic incidents”: The Council feels that it is wrong to single out a particular group with the adoption of such a definition; adopting a stance on discrimination toward any person or group based on religious affiliation seems more appropriate.

- “Review policies on University neutrality and sponsorship of student organization and academic program events and activities; develop model institutional protocols to ensure balanced
perspectives are shared over time”: This recommendation seems unrealistic: should the university be required to actively seek out student organizations and suggest/help plan events in order to ensure a balance of viewpoints are represented in a given academic year (or any time period)? A policy of fairness seems more appropriate: all student organizations should have equal rights to be heard and plan activities on campus.

Systemwide Recommendations

- “Collect population data on religious identity and expand Middle Eastern ethnicity category on undergraduate application”: As discussed above, this recommendation has to be taken up with a great deal of sensitivity and should obviously be voluntary. Ethnicity is already a part of standard data collection (e.g. through the UC application) and expanding ethnicity categories there seems appropriate. However, we currently do not have any formal mechanism for collecting data on religious identity and the Council doubts that this would be appropriate for inclusion on the UC application; some alternative mechanism for collecting this data would need to be developed.

- “Council should recommend to the faculty diversity working group to consider best practices for inclusion of religious diversity among faculty”: While the Council recognizes the importance of a diversity of viewpoints on campus, we feel that it would not be possible to gather sufficient and reliable data on faculty religious identity to enable the development of policies related to the hiring of faculty.

- “Increase communication and visibility of systemwide reporting hotline”: The Council strongly endorses this recommendation and emphasizes the importance of increasing student awareness of the hotline.

Campus Recommendations

- “Provide a student meditation or reflection space on campus”: As noted above, the Council has some concerns about this recommendation. Such a space would obviously need to be non-denominational if established on campus. Scheduling of this space could be an issue: who would be responsible for resolving scheduling conflicts between different religious groups? Alternative responses to this recommendation might include: (1) Enabling student groups to reserve space for prayer and meditation on campus in the same way that other events are scheduled (makes resolving time conflicts much easier and makes more efficient use of campus space); (2) Encouraging the development of nearby but off-campus religious facilities (some religious groups already have established off-campus organizations).

- “Include students from religiously diverse groups on Chancellors’ climate councils”: As discussed above, this recommendation is well-intentioned but might be challenging to implement.

- “Increase Islamic Studies or Courses in Middle Eastern studies”: The Council endorses this recommendation. Given that around 20% of the world’s population identifies as Muslim there is ample motivation for scholarly activity focused on Islam. It should nevertheless be noted that UCLA has done an admirable job in expanding course offerings related to this area. In particular
the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures has recently hired a new faculty member in Islamic Studies and a lecturer in Arabic Language.

An overview of UCLA programs in this area: Islam is a global phenomenon; it is not confined to Southwest Asia ("the Middle East"). Therefore, courses relevant to the study of Islam and of Islamic societies are taught in several departments, not only Near Eastern Languages and Cultures (NELC).

- **NELC** offers BA programs in Arabic, Iranian Studies, Jewish Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies, and MA and PhD programs in Arabic and Iranian. The Department also offers instruction in several other relevant languages, including Turkish, Syriac, Coptic, and Hebrew.
- The Department of History offers a PhD in the field of Middle Eastern history.
- The IDP in Islamic Studies offers MA and PhD programs in Islamic Studies.
- The Center for Near Eastern Studies administers Department of Education fellowships to graduate students in the field; sponsors conferences, lectures, and other events; and performs outreach to local communities.
- Courses on Southwest Asian and Islamic societies and cultures are taught in several other departments, including Anthropology, Comparative Literature, and Political Science.
- Some UC campuses do not offer extensive programs in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. However, UCLA, Berkeley, Santa Barbara, and Davis are national leaders in these fields.

While we support the recommendation that more such programs be established (MASCCR, p. 12), we believe it may be necessary to explain to Muslim student advocates that such programs may not do what they expect. This is because the purpose of Islamic Studies programs is not to promote or advocate the Islamic faith. In fact, secular scholarship on Islam and Islamic societies often draws conclusions that make believers uncomfortable.

- **"President should recommend the adoption of an academic diversity requirement".** UCLA has, of course, recently considered the adoption of a similar General Education requirement. This proposal was rejected by the faculty (and a similar proposal was rejected another time previously). Revisiting this issue is likely warranted, but care must be taken to learn from the failure of the previous two attempts.

cc: Jaime Balboa, Chief Administrative Officer, Academic Senate
    Linda Mohr, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer, Academic Senate
    Melissa Spagnuolo, Principal Policy Analyst, Academic Senate