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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS:

I love the University of California! UCSB has been home for six of the most exciting and stimulating years of my life. But this great institution is in danger. It faces a financial crisis, waning support from politicians and voters, and an internal sense of both complacency and confusion as to its purposes and its plans. We should ask ourselves: Could the UC system go the way of General Motors?

This year, when the budget crisis first made headlines, I was shocked to hear an administrator say, in essence: "I'm not worried. The UC will go on. It will survive."

As an historian of capitalism, I was dismayed. Those words could have come from the mouths of auto executives, assembly line workers, and working class families who gambled their livelihoods on the seemingly invulnerable American auto industry. No company, school or institution is immune from the ebb and flow of profits and politics. California once had a system of secondary schools that ranked among the best in the nation; now they are well below the norm.

Could something similar happen to the University of California, which still remains the best system of publically-controlled higher education in the world? Recently, the governor proposed an unprecedented 25% reduction in the state's funding for the UC. If the UC survives the present crisis, perhaps the real question is: "Survive as what?"

I am constantly shocked to discover that students, staff, and faculty, throughout the UC system, not just at UCSB, have no understanding of the principles behind the UC and the much-admired master plan for higher education in California. Many know that Berkeley was founded in 1868; Yet, most have never learned the origins of the University of California as a system of research universities, along with the companion state universities and community colleges. This 3-tiered system was not one of an elite, Ivy League-type caste but of opportunity for hundreds of thousands of Californians. By design, Students beginning in community colleges can end up getting graduate degrees at UCSB.

This system is a product of the early post World War II years when the University of California was refounded, refunded, and greatly expanded. Although no single individual can lay claim to reshaping an entire institution of higher education, Clark Kerr comes close. Few remember who he really was. Each campus has a building named after Kerr. Here at UCSB, it is the grey building with red trim situated near South Hall and the Arbor.

As a labor economist and educator, Kerr was a visionary. He was Berkeley's chancellor in the 1950s and UC President from 1958 to 1967. As the behind-the-

scenes architect of the 1960 Master Plan for higher education in California, Kerr refounded the UC system as the Blue and Gold standard to which every other institution of higher learning aspired. Kerr's hallmark was a guarantee "that there would be a place in college for every high school graduate...who chose to attend." Indeed, Kerr was proud to announce, "California was the first (state) to make such a commitment."

When we force ourselves to remember his vision for accessible, quality, public higher education than we can understand what the UC was, what we might lose, and what we can do about it.

Kerr's dream for a "multiversity," as he called it, was rooted in his career as an economist. He finished his BA at Swarthmore and then came West to Stanford for graduate study. He hated Stanford! He considered the school conservative and hidebound. So he transferred to Berkeley in the mid-1930s, where he worked with Paul Taylor, the radical economist. Together, they visited the large farms in the Central Valley, the famous "factories in the field." There, they studied: the poverty, hardship, and desperation that John Steinbeck captured in his 1937 novel, the *Grapes of Wrath*. Kerr also witnessed, firsthand, the struggle between agriculture workers and the growers who employed and exploited them. His observations left him keenly aware of the inequalities that distorted American democracy but also dedicated to the peaceful resolution of conflict between labor and capital in the U.S. and elsewhere.

By the 1950s, Kerr had become convinced that a vastly expanded system of higher education was the key to a dynamic, harmonious society based on skill and knowledge. In this new economy, Americans no longer toiled in factories or fields but wore "gray flannel suits" in jobs that required skills of a technical and imaginative sort. In this new order, everyone enjoyed unparalleled opportunities for affluence. Mass higher education was the key to this newly prosperous America. In his famous 1963 book, "The Uses of the University," Kerr argued that the university was "at the hinge of history."

He was clearly an optimist! And perhaps far too much of one. In a favorite speech, entitled "1984 Revisited," Kerr dismissed George Orwell's dire totalitarian warnings. Instead of an oppressive police state, Kerr found the technologically-advanced future full of promise. He predicted Americans would: double their income within a generation, work but thirty-two hours a week, and benefit from a more equitable distribution of wealth. But none of this would take place in an automatic fashion. Kerr stressed that you had to construct this new California Dream with tax dollars, political commitment and a plan - for education and the economy - that made the market and the corporations the servant rather than the master of the citizenry.

Kerr's vision is all about you: a university campus designed to educate the great mass of the American people, with high standards and an egalitarian flavor. Kerr succeeded in building this progressive “multiversity.” To accommodate the influx of baby boomers, Kerr oversaw the opening of the San Diego, Irvine, and Santa Cruz campuses and he greatly expanded UC Santa Barbara. And despite the expenditure of an enormous sum of money, a UC education remained affordable. Under Kerr’s tenure, UC students had no tuition and almost no fees. But Kerr was more than an institution builder. He also supported academic freedom in an era when Cold War era McCarthyism had spread its shadow across UC and so many other schools.

Clark Kerr was a controversial figure. J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI kept a file on him for many years, even when he was the UC President. At the height of the student movement in the 1960s, students at almost every UC campus hissed his name after he clashed with free speech advocates at Berkeley. California governor Ronald Reagan thought Kerr too soft on the students. Just four weeks after moving into the governor’s mansion in 1967, Reagan pushed the Regents to fire Kerr.

At the time, the Berkeley radicals, and like-minded students at UCSB and other UC campuses, thought that the great threat to freedom and free inquiry at the University came from the intrusive computer, from corporate influence, from the military, and from a burdensome administrative bureaucracy.

And those fears must be taken seriously. Still, when we look back at the protests of the 1960s and 1970s, we can see that their fears may well have been misdirected. Universities, with the UC in the lead, remain among the freest arenas in the country to debate ideas, politics, ethics, and values. But freedom in the university remains imperiled, not from an authoritarian bureaucracy or direct political interference, but from chronic fiscal starvation, which began well before the current crisis! Inadequate funding: thwarts the UC’s mission, limits its expansive research agenda, and deprives tens of thousands of students of the opportunities they deserve. These trends have burdened students with massive debt and kept deserving Californians out of classrooms, which can be, as I have seen as both student and teacher, some of the most invigorating spaces in the world. A few years before his death in 2004, Kerr himself was concerned about the UC’s fate. As he looked back, he contemplated, “In 1960, we made plans 20, 30, 40 years ahead...who now dares to make those plans?”

Still, there is hope that the UC as Kerr envisioned will survive. There is tremendous student involvement in the administration of the university. One of our own, Jesse Bernal, is even the student Regent. More importantly, many campuses are still expanding and the UC has even recently started a new campus in Merced to better serve the state, particularly residents in the Central Valley. The UC also provides a wonderful and *comparatively* affordable education to other state

university systems. Moreover, the UC unions, which Kerr, as a labor economist, would have supported, have continued to ensure that a UC job remains a good job, which enables workers to live, work, and perhaps even obtain a UC education. Our own TA union has done much to keep class sizes down thus protecting undergraduate education and also making it possible to be both a worker and a scholar. Indeed, these workload protections are in large part responsible for my own productivity and success.

But we need more. There is much to be done to ensure that the UC does not just go on but reassumes its place as a model for accessible, quality higher education. It is great that we have a University of California in Merced, which is serving the grandchildren of the farm workers who Kerr observed in the 1930s. But we have 38 million people in California. We need five more UC Merced.

We must remember: The current crisis is not the product of an absolute scarcity of money. Rather, it is a function of our unwillingness to tax ourselves for the kind of public goods that are necessary for our society. We have got to start planning again for the UC, for California, for the country. If our state is to remain anything more than a golden dream, it needs a vibrant and expanding University. We have to plan for it, work for it, and dedicate ourselves and our wealth to it.