February 21, 2024

TO: Sang-Hee Lee, Chair
Riverside Division of the Academic Senate

FROM: Wesley Leonard, Chair
CHASS Executive Committee

RE: Proposed UC Regents Policy on Use of University Administrative Websites

In the contemporary political climate, where free speech and academic freedom on college campuses are increasingly under attack, the CHASS Faculty Executive Committee unanimously believes the Regents should reject the proposed UC Regents Policy on Use of University Administrative Websites. As detailed below, we find the proposed policy to be both dangerously vague and impractical, in addition to being incongruent with academic freedom and the mission of the UC.

First, we are concerned that the proposed policy is in conflict with the principle of academic freedom. Charles Robinson, general counsel to the UC Office of the President, stated during the January 24, 2024, Regents meeting that the policy intended to address “the types of speech that the University would feel uncomfortable with.” This egregiously goes against the principles of academic freedom the University purportedly espouses and also leaves open who or what exactly is meant by “the University.” We urge the Regents to reaffirm their commitment to academic freedom and to protect faculty rights.

Second, we take issue with the targeted nature of the proposed policy. We are concerned that a policy attempting to restrict academic freedom would apply only to “Units” while exempting the Chair of the Board of Regents, the UC president, the chancellors, and the leadership of the Academic Senate.

Third, we regard the proposed policy as a rash reaction to specific current political events. Regent Hadi Makarechian laid bare that the proposed policy emerged as a direct response to statements—protected by free speech and academic freedom—against the longstanding and ongoing Israeli genocide, siege, and displacement of Palestinians. Makarechian stated, “let’s go back and see why we brought this policy to the table…it was because some people were making
some political statements related to the Hamas and Palestinians. They were making, whether we want to call it hate speech for one side or the other.”

Fourth, the proposed policy fails to define what constitutes a political statement as opposed to an administrative statement and fails to engage if and how the political can be separated from scholarly expertise, or who would be empowered to make such a determination. Does the policy intend to police Units’ mission statements that, by the nature of a given Unit’s mission, might be deemed “political”? Such examples abound across our college, and include entire Units such as the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies and the Department of Ethnic Studies, whose foundations are rooted in expressions of social justice, anti-imperialism, and gender equality, and whose research, teaching, and outreach frequently engage matters that have been politicized. We emphasize that these departments and their faculty are founded upon rigorous scholarship and expertise, and that there are public-facing topics where collective statements on main websites are called for because of their importance. As such, we encourage the Regents to support the status quo where faculty determine when, under what circumstances, and through what modes of dissemination to make collective statements based on their expertise.

Finally, we call attention to the established practices of shared governance in the UC system, which we believe have not been followed. While the current memo exemplifies a mode of consultation, we note that the policy in question was actually put forward at a Regents meeting before most UC Units or their representatives had even seen it, and that our current opportunity to offer feedback is occurring only after intervention by the Academic Council to secure the consultation that should have occurred from the outset. We expect the Regents to engage a thorough process of consultation with the faculty on all UC campuses and research institutions with regard to any policy.

1 https://youtu.be/HwWDxvpWKME?t=1357
2 https://youtu.be/HwWDxvpWKME?t=2895