Berkeley: A Time of Resilience and Renaissance

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The modern historian Arnold Toynbee argued that challenges that are great enough to cause extinction of a culture (such as foreign invasion or resource exhaustion), were the ideal conditions for great civilizations to develop. His “challenge and response” theory reminds me of what UC Berkeley and public education as a whole are experiencing today. Much has been written about these challenges. Too little has been written about the responses. Although I see and feel the stresses from budget cuts that affect our students, staff, and faculty, I also see resilience, vitality, and a renaissance that I haven’t experienced since I first came here as a student in the 1970s.

**Entrepreneurial initiative**, which has always been a part of Berkeley’s culture, has reached an unprecedented pitch. An example is the new one-year Professional Master’s Program in our School of Engineering that combines technical skills with a core leadership curriculum in business skills like management and finance. The program departs from Berkeley’s historical focus on research and producing Ph.D.s, with the hope of redefining what it means to be an engineer in a different world with different needs.

Another newly launched initiative is the Berkeley SkyDeck Innovation Center, located atop Berkeley’s tallest building. Skydeck is an incubator for spin-out companies linked to our business and engineering schools, as well as a place for venture capitalists to come see what work is being done here. We have always been engaged with incubating startups, but we’ve never engaged with the community in this purposeful way.

The Blum Center for Developing Economies focuses on poverty alleviation and serving the three billion people in the world who live on less than two dollars a day. One area of focus is the Center’s safe water and sanitation projects, developing the next generation of effective and affordable water treatment technologies. Ultraviolet and solar disinfection systems are just some of the Center’s many projects. These are a few of the many entrepreneurial initiatives I see around me.

**Self-determination** is also at an all-time high. UC Berkeley’s future is more of its own making than ever before. There is recognition that we, whether an individual, a department, or a campus as a whole, can more freely go after the “white spaces” – or unexplored opportunities – around us. While we remain part of a larger whole, some important decision-making has shifted from the center to units. It is the units that in most cases are closest to the opportunities, to the best ways of educating our people, and to that next frontier of ideas that will unlock better ways of living.

As one example, a few years ago, UC Berkeley’s provost asked the Deans of all the programs on campus to come up with new ways to generate revenues for the university. As a result, our Deans have become more self-determined, innovative, and entrepreneurial. This too is happening at a higher level at the UC campus level. This type of decentralization is a win-win for everyone because the center is more
efficient, doing what makes the most sense for it to be doing, and the units are more empowered to make the decisions that are closest to them.

Our increased self-determination is also driven from the fact that only 12 percent of Berkeley’s operating budget this year will come from the State of California, down nearly 30 percent in just the past three years. In many ways, it’s empowering that this source of funding is at a low point—we are looking ahead to new ways to innovate and determine our own future. This reality gives us a new sense of purpose and focus. And it is showing up in the data: Berkeley’s total revenues over the last seven years have continued to climb, despite the State’s funding continuing to fall.

Operational agility and clarity is another response to our challenges. Because state funding has been reduced so significantly, the university has had to examine the way it does its work, and redesign that work to align even more fully with our mission of education, knowledge creation, and community engagement.

At the Berkeley-Haas School of Business, for example, we are now flatter with three fewer managerial layers. These changes were and continue to be hard on our people and on our traditional ways. But we are stronger now. If we are to be stewards of the resources society has entrusted us with—whether student fees, federal research funding, private philanthropy, or State funding—we need to do our work with the agility and clarity of purpose that reminds us that we’re part of something big.

Through all of this, Berkeley will remain public not because of its financial model, but because of its differentiated mission and values. Access is a perfect example: Even with dramatically reduced state support, the university has continued to serve more undergraduates from households with annual incomes of less than $50,000 than all eight Ivy League universities combined.

This flourishing of entrepreneurial initiative, self-determination, and operational agility are our living renaissance—our response to unprecedented challenge. Our collective responses are key to making the UC Berkeley of ten years from now even more valuable to the world than it is today.