

Dear students, dear teachers, dear coworkers, dear family and friends, dear campus community,

I was born in Denmark and lived there for 23 years. I then studied for two years in Edinburgh and the last 12 years I have lived in California. I was a student at UCSC for 6 years and this is my 6th year teaching at UC Berkeley. I have come to love the University of California with the same intensity that I love my home country. What that means is that I delight and take pride in all that is great about this university and worry desperately about preserving and cultivating its greatness and about stamping out rot and fending off attacks.

I delight in the intellectual caliber of the university, the intelligence, diversity and spirit of its students, the beauty of its campuses, the non-hierarchical nature of its leadership, and the friendly and inclusive atmosphere that permeates the institution. At the same time, I worry about systemic problems of funding, episodes of intolerance, lack of faculty participation in shared governance, and exertion of administrative power over students in a time of debate and unrest.

On this occasion, I salute Berkeley for promoting good teaching. To my mind, good teaching takes three things. First, it takes good students, by which I mean students that care, think, and do the work. Second, it takes diversity in the classroom, because diversity fosters respect and understanding like no other. Finally, it takes preparation on the part of the teacher. A class can fail for instructive reasons; lack of preparation is not one of them.

So does Berkeley promote good teaching? Yes. The very existence of this award and its long history is direct evidence of this. More importantly Berkeley supports the three essential ingredients of good teaching. Our students care, think, and do the work. This semester I am teaching Introduction to Linguistic Science and on homework 8 I included an optional task. I made it optional because the task was to figure out the core idea of my first published research contribution, and you can not require an undergraduate student to do this. I told the students that there were no points associated with the optional task and yet more than a third of them did the task (in addition to the set of required, and already demanding, tasks) and many got it right. And these are students in an introductory class. So yes, Berkeley students care, they think, and they do the work.

There are many kinds of diversity and they all promote good teaching. When teaching linguistics, an important dimension of diversity is linguistic diversity and our classrooms are linguistically diverse. There are 96 students in my Introduction to Linguistic Science class this semester and they speak 33 languages between them. I cannot overstate how much that level of diversity enriches the class. Finally, do Berkeley teachers have time to prepare for their classes? Yes, with a reasonable dose of self-discipline and generous support from colleagues, Graduate Student Instructors and staff, we have time to prepare our classes.

So if all is well, why do I bring this up? I bring it up because decisions of direct relevance to the conditions on teaching at Berkeley are about to be made. The Final Diagnostic Report of the Operational Excellence Steering Committee was released 10 days ago and the initial recommendations from the Working Groups of the UC Commission on the Future were discussed at an Academic Senate meeting earlier today. I will not pretend to understand all the issues involved, nor do I know the best way forward, but I have read enough reports and listened to enough presentations to worry about the impact of these decisions on teaching at Berkeley. Proposed changes to IT and HR support, specifically at the departmental level, could drastically affect how much time teachers have to prepare for their classes. If I had not had the expert, immediate, and never-failing support of our departmental staff, Natalie Babler, Belén Flores, Paula Floro, and Ronald Sprouse, I would have been lost in administrative, technical, logistical, and compliance issues, and I would not have stood here today. I urge campus leaders to keep this connection between teaching and departmental staff support in mind when you make your decisions.

When I lived in Santa Cruz, there was a campaign to “Keep Santa Cruz weird”. That’s Santa Cruz the town, not the university. I call on everyone here to “Keep Berkeley Strong”. When it comes to teaching, that means keep attracting the good students, who care, think and do the work. Keep our classrooms diverse by keeping Berkeley accessible to students from all walks of life and, finally, keep supporting teachers at the local level so that we have time to do one of the main things we were hired to do, namely teach.

Thank you.

Line Mikkelsen, Distinguished Teaching Award ceremony, Zellerbach Hall, April 22, 2010