



THE 2006 OLIVER JOHNSON AWARD

Michael Cowan

In the 37 years since joining the UC Santa Cruz American Studies and Literature faculty, Professor Michael Cowan has demonstrated exceptional leadership on numerous committees and task forces of the Academic Senate. He began serving on Senate committees in 1969, his first year at UCSC, and was the only person to serve twice as chair of the Santa Cruz Academic Senate, in 1979-80 and from 1994 to 1996. He worked closely with the administration on divisional and systemwide Planning and Budget committees before becoming Universitywide Academic Senate chair in 2000. In 1997, Cowan received the first Dean McHenry Award for Distinguished Leadership—given by the UCSC Academic Senate to acknowledge outstanding service.

Professor Cowan first served on the Academic Council in the late 1970s when Karl Pister was Chair of Academic Council. (Cowan again worked with Pister in the mid-1990s while he was chairing the Santa Cruz Division of the Academic Senate for the second time and Pister was the Chancellor at UC Santa Cruz.) Cowan notes that systemwide Senate service provided him the unique opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from other UC campuses to address issues facing the university as a whole. “Coming to better understand the experiences and perspectives they brought from their own campuses was wonderfully deprovincializing,” he says. “I was able to help facilitate the principled and creative inter-campus faculty collaboration that characterizes the Senate at its best.”

Cowan recalls his most satisfying experience as Academic Council chair to be his involvement with BOARS, which in 2000-01 was working closely with the Office of the President and Senate divisions to examine and refine the University’s undergraduate admissions criteria, a complex process that, among other things, involved an evaluation of the use of SAT exams, consideration of a “dual admissions” arrangement that would help community college students make themselves eligible to attend the University, and encouragement of individual campuses to employ a comprehensive, multi-factored review of UC-eligible students in determining selection. He was deeply gratified when the Board of Regents voted in May of 2001 to rescind SP1 and SP2 and to reaffirm the Senate’s central role in the determination of admission to the University. Also rewarding was his service as chair of the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS), a forum in which Senate leaders of the UC, CSU, and Community College systems collaborated to further California students’ preparation for and access to the state’s rich higher education opportunities. As Academic Council chair, Cowan also supported the efforts of the Universitywide Committee

on Research Policy to establish more vigorous Senate involvement in academic oversight of the National Laboratories. In addition, he inaugurated the now-annual fall retreat of divisional Senate chairs and systemwide committee chairs and staff, which has facilitated fuller inter-committee understanding and coordination.

As “pioneer” faculty at UCSC, Cowan and his Senate colleagues were inevitably involved in a large amount of academic and budgetary planning. Cowan recalls that the opportunity to share in the building of the innovative 9th UC campus—to “put my shoulder to the raising of posts and beams”—was a big draw, and Senate committee work gave the young faculty a sense that they were involved in an enterprise that went far beyond the boundaries of individual programs. As an inaugural member and later chair of the UCSC Committee on Planning and Budget, Cowan says he was challenged to encourage planning decisions that not only addressed immediate concerns but also reached into the future, and to help develop academic plans that offered creative flexibility to the changing conditions inherent in the growth of a new institution. “I’ve always welcomed the challenges that budget-making has presented to our creativity as academics,” he says. “I believe that academic planning should be understood in a capacious sense as including the broader concern for cultivating a campus culture in which the life of the mind is valued outside as well as inside the classroom, in which members of the campus community are committed to respectful, civil discourse—even about emotionally charged issues—and in which its members see their citizenly responsibilities as extending beyond the campus to the larger local, regional, national, and global communities in which they are enmeshed.”

Cowan is particularly interested in mid-term planning. “Mid-term plans, if thoughtfully crafted, mediate between the day-to-day problem solving in which we’re all caught and the utopian imagining that can inspire and energize.”

He says UC faces Sisyphean-like challenges in its endeavor to serve multiple constituencies who place different demands on the University, and in the University’s endless quests to secure adequate resources and make a UC education more accessible and affordable to the state’s diverse citizens. But, he notes, “We exercise our muscles by collaborating to push the stone up the mountain. In fact, our greatest achievements as a University have come when we have maintained our collective will to engage the mountain. We’re constantly walking a wind-swept diplomatic tightwire. Still, our challenge remains to walk that tightwire with as much grace and dignity as we can. We must ensure that our work at all levels is transparent and meets the criteria of integrity as well as excellence. We must use our extraordinary communicative skills as scholars and teachers to make our work and mission accessible and understandable to all our many constituencies. We must listen carefully to their diverse concerns and perspectives and engage them in respectful conversations in which both we and they become better educated. And by ‘we’ I mean not merely our campus and systemwide administrators and their staffs but all of us who care about the health of the University.”

Cowan believes strongly that UC has a responsibility to welcome a diversity of students who have the ability and motivation to take maximum advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the University. “Such students need to come from all sectors of California—and, for graduate students, from beyond the State’s boundaries as well—in order for the State to

realize the full benefit from the contributions they, as UC graduates, can make to its prosperity and to the quality of its social and moral life. When the State helps us invest in these students, through fair and creative admissions and transfer policies and outreach strategies, it is investing wisely in its own future as well as theirs.”

Professor Cowan is currently a Study Center Director in London (Bloomsbury) for the UC Education Abroad Program. He hopes someday that twenty percent or more of UC students will participate in an international education experience at some point during their careers. He also sees opportunities for faculty. “Serving as an EAP study center director has given me a welcome opportunity to think about ways to enlarge the multi-directional highways between UC and institutions of higher education throughout the world. I’d like to see UC enhance collaborative research efforts between UC faculty and faculty in other parts of the world. Such expansion will not occur without a vigorous, systematic, and more fully coordinative planning involving EAP, campus faculty and administrative leadership, the Office of the President, and the Regents. The Academic Senate could help lead the way by involving a larger number of campus and systemwide Senate committees, as well as academic departments, in thinking about concrete ways in which expanded international education opportunities could benefit their faculty and students.”

Cowan believes shared governance at UC is fundamentally strong due in large part to the thousands of faculty who, through dedicated Senate service, have enriched the University. “Shared governance works best when both parties not only respect but also consciously show that they respect the vital contributions each makes to the partnership. That respect cannot only tolerate but absolutely requires sustained, searching, and respectful debate. The University’s motto is to ‘make light’. I like the light fired by friction, but I like it best when we collaboratively harness that light for creative, humane ends. That’s what shared governance achieves at its best.”

To faculty members considering Academic Senate service, he says “Don’t hesitate. Do it. Your service will enhance shared governance. It will help your administrators be more effective administrators. It will strengthen your campus and the University as a whole. And it will enrich you.”

Professor Cowan is a former President of the American Studies Association. His primary research areas are in American cultural and literary studies and in academic institutional culture. He chaired the Community Studies and Literature departments, served as provost of the campus’s Merrill College, was founding chair of the UCSC American Studies Department in 1978 and also served as chair of that department from 1990 to 1999. He served as dean of humanities from 1983 to 1989 and as Senior Advisor to the Chancellor from 2001 to 2005.

The Oliver Johnson Award is given every other year to honor a University of California faculty member or members who have demonstrated outstanding and creative contributions to shared governance at the divisional and systemwide level.

[Oliver Johnson](#), who died in 2000, was a professor of philosophy and longtime Senate activist. He served as the chair of the Assembly and Academic Council in 1981-82; as vice

chair of the Assembly and Council in 1980-81; and as chair of the Riverside Division of the Academic Senate from 1963 to 1966, performing with great distinction in all those posts. In 1996, Professor Johnson made a substantial gift to the systemwide Senate, the earnings from which are used to fund the award that bears his name.

The awards were presented at the annual Academic Council dinner in July.

- *Michael LaBriola*