

Leo Estrada leads Academic Senate in tackling tough issues

Judy Lin | October 05, 2015



Christelle Snow/UCLA

After decades of community service at the local and national levels, urban planning associate professor Leo Estrada is now poised to lead the UCLA Academic Senate in deliberating several major issues during the academic year.

Leo Estrada has spent decades serving his community at the local and national levels, as well as at UCLA as a member of the Academic Senate. He's now taken his involvement in the senate to a higher level as its 2015-16 chair. Estrada, an urban planner and associate professor at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, has played an influential role in the life of greater Los Angeles. In 1990, he worked with civic leaders to redraw the map that redistricted the L.A. County Board of Supervisors to give Latinos equitable representation. He served on the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department (the Christopher Commission) that investigated the 1991 beating of Rodney King and police response. On the national

level, he helped guide retirement policies as a board member of the 37-million-strong AARP.

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Now Estrada is facing the challenge of leading the Academic Senate through a yearlong agenda bullet-pointed with major issues, including a University of California proposal to make changes to retirement benefits; systemwide innovations to enhance student success; and a new teaching professorship that may be offered to new faculty to help cope with heavy teaching loads in the UCLA College.



Estrada joined the UCLA faculty in 1977 but didn't become active in the Academic Senate for some time. "During my first 15 years at UCLA," he recalled, "I benefited from the things the Academic Senate did on this campus ... without really knowing what was going on there."

Once he became aware of the important work undertaken by the senate, however, Estrada was in all the way. For the past two decades, he has served on several key committees, as well as two separate councils that set curricula for undergraduate and graduate students.

"The more I learned," he said, "the more I began to realize how much impact the senate has on everything, from faculty welfare to ensuring a quality learning experience for our students." He has also been pleased to experience UCLA's vibrant system of shared governance. "The administration knows that if they're going to make a decision that impacts faculty, students or curriculum, they bring us in from the very beginning and we try to come to a decision that works for all."

But the prospect of taking on the responsibility of leading an organization that represents UCLA's approximately 4,300 tenure-track faculty prompted Estrada to first consult with previous senate chairs. "Every one of them told me, 'It's one of the best things you can do to give back to UCLA.'"

Estrada will have plenty of opportunity to do just that as senate leaders tackle an agenda that's packed with issues of concern to faculty. At the top of the list for many are [potential changes to the UC retirement plan](#) that would apply to faculty and staff hired after July 1, 2016. The UC Office of the President (UCOP), in consultation with a [universitywide task force](#), is studying various options.

Estrada is concerned about how the proposed changes would impact on faculty hiring, particularly at a time when large numbers of faculty are retiring.

"We have to be competitive to sustain the quality of UCLA," Estrada said. "We believe that we recruit very good faculty because we offer not only competitive salaries but some of the best benefits around compared to other universities. If our benefits are no better than anyplace else, our salaries may not be enough."

UCLA's senate is also actively engaged in systemwide innovations to enhance student success, among them [Transfer Pathways](#), a new academic "roadmap" developed by UCOP in collaboration with the systemwide Academic Senate on which Estrada serves. Launched this past summer, it provides California community college students with a single set of courses they can take to prepare for admission in a given major across any of UC's nine undergraduate campuses.

The senate must also respond to UCOP's wish to see more undergraduates participating in UC's three-year degree program. "Very few UCLA students are taking advantage of it," said Estrada, so faculty are asking students for their views on the program's benefits and drawbacks. "Maybe this is a more of a special program for special types of students, rather than one UCLA should be working to get more students involved in," he added.

At UCLA, one proposal that Estrada hopes will be implemented this year involves a teaching professorship, a new category of full-time faculty in the College who would be hired largely on the basis of their teaching skills and who will serve primarily in the classroom, with supplemental research in pedagogy or other areas. Teaching professors, who would be eligible to become members of the Academic Senate, could take on classes — from highly impacted core classes to small classes in departmental minors — that busy tenure-track faculty must currently handle.

"There are a lot of pieces to put together, but we have deans and chairs who are asking us to move quickly because they want to start hiring for next fall," Estrada said.

Above all, Estrada said he has the interest of students at heart in whatever the new academic year brings.

"I love UCLA. I always tell people, 'I like my colleagues, but I love my students.' I have taught at several institutions — I have never taught better students, brighter students, students who are so eager to learn than my students at UCLA. I can't imagine a better place to teach."

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