

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH JOHN A. PEREZ
CHAIR, UC BOARD OF REGENTS**

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José: I know this is the first time where we see a formidable Latino presence within the UC governing group, which is exciting because California is 40 percent Latino today. Can you comment on the governance piece and your thoughts on having Latinos on the UC Regents?

John: Yeah, I mean, I think you see right now, the regents are more diverse than they've ever been. And I think it was part of the real effort of former Governor Jerry Brown, who appointed many of us to align with the expectations of the Constitution. Article IX, Section 9 of the state Constitution, which talks about the university, says that the regents should be a broad cross-section of the state of California. And for a long time, that was a talking point, but it wasn't real. And in fact, today what we have is the manifestation of that, a board that looks more like the state demographically, economically, unfortunately, still not geographically, but looks more like the state than it ever has before. And I think what you also see is a board that takes from that direction that says we should also work to make sure that in our actions we make the university accessible as broadly as possible to all the promising students in the state of California.

José: Yes, the governing group probably gets it, into the role of assessing and reviewing key people for your key positions to manage such a large organization. Can you talk a little bit about that?

John: So, you know, a lot of the day to day decision making of the university is delegated to the president and then to the chancellors. So for a board, it's important that we select those top-level spots in a way that aligns with our vision. We're in the middle of searching for a new president of the university. We plan on making an announcement in July and having a new president start in August. And I think that that will be a clear indication of what with the board majority is looking for. But in our May meeting, we selected a new chancellor for UC Merced, Dr. Juan Sánchez Muñoz, who is only the third Latino ever in the 150 year history of the university to be chancellor of any of our campuses. The previous two were at UC Riverside and

one of them was, you know, for a very short period, Fran Cordova. So the only time that we had sustained leadership of a Latino chancellor was Tomás Rivera at Riverside. And it wasn't lost on me that when Dr Juan Sánchez Muñoz gave his first address to the Board of Regents as he talked about his vision for UC Merced, he also quoted Tomás Rivera. So, there was a beautiful, beautiful, in my opinion, a historic homage to Tomás Rivera as Dr Juan Sánchez Muñoz assumes his office, but his selection as chancellor also says something else. He and his wife Zenaida are proof of what the university can do. Each of them was first in their family to go to college. Each of them got a PhD from a U.S. school and each of them became a great faculty member. Chancellor Muñoz's father was a farmworker, picking grapes within miles of the Merced campus in Merced before the chancellor was born. And then, his parents moved here to Los Angeles and he grew up in Boyle Heights, probably about two miles from where I live right now. So here is a first-generation college student who then joined the Marines to serve his country, went back to grad school, taught K through 12, taught community college and then taught at the university level and is now our chancellor. His wife was first in her family to go to college. Her parents were janitors at UC San Diego. And she went on to get a PhD and has been a tremendous faculty member as well as a leader in her own right. And for me, it was really special because when I gave my first talk to the regents as chair, one of the things I said is that we must be the kind of employer that we expect others to be and that we have 250,000 employees at the University of California. Roughly 50,000 are in jobs that don't require a bachelor's degree. But we ought to hold ourselves to making sure that we give their children the chance to become our students. And isn't it amazing that Zenaida Aguirre-Muñoz, who'll come with her husband to Merced, is a perfect example? It's proof that it works. Both of them are proof of the transformational power of a publicly-minded university.

José: Outstanding. In the Regents' particular role of managing and putting the team together that run such a large system, lets turn to the medical schools, the UC system operates. We have worked with Dr. Joaquin Arambula, an assemblymember from Fresno to look at how we can increase the number of Latino physicians in California. UC has the largest number of medical schools. Do you see an opportunity, perhaps, to recruit the first Latino to be dean of one of these medical schools?

John: We'll do one better than that. We just selected a few months ago a new vice president for UC Health, somebody who oversees the entire system-wide health enterprise. And she happens

to be a Latina who is an infectious disease specialist with a speciality in pediatric respiratory disease, somebody who's perfectly aligned to lead our efforts, especially when we're dealing with questions like COVID, somebody who is perfectly aligned to look at areas where we need to do a better job of understanding and treating the medically underserved and building a cadre of doctors who are culturally competent to go out and be the providers for the entire state and the entire country. Her name is Carrie Byington, and sometimes not all Latino last names are obvious. People may miss Carrie Byington being a Latina, but she is a Latina who has done amazing work in public health as well. So much so that during the last Olympics in Brazil, she was part of a group of doctors that helped Team USA in Brazil protect themselves from exposure to Zika virus. Right? Just one of the many examples of her work in disease management. And so, I mean, I think it's incredibly powerful for the premier public research institution to have its health care enterprise now headed by a Latina.

José: Congratulations. That's great news.

John: Now, that's not to say we don't have more to do, right? So, right before I took over as chair of the board, where I was chair of the academic committee, which is now chaired by María Anguiano, and one of the things we were doing was looking at all of our professional skills and how we could create the incentives and, quite frankly, the accountability to make sure they do a better job of reflecting the totality of the state of California, both in the faculty ranks and in the graduate student and professional student ranks. We have something called the PRIME program, which was started in the wake of Prop 209, as a way that we could legally look at expanding access to folks in health care who are going to go and serve historically underrepresented communities. And then, you know, in addition to Dr. Arambula in the assembly, one of the other people who's been focused on this is Assemblyman José Medina, who chairs the Higher Ed Committee. And so when José first got elected in 2012, one of the first things he identified as needing to get a medical school up and running at Riverside. I was the Speaker at the time and that first year that José was in the legislature and Senator Roth was in the legislature there, both left in 2012, we were able to find a legislative solution to using state money to get the medical school up and running at Riverside. And so we got it up. We got it funded in 2012. And it is a medical school that focuses specifically on the needs of underserved communities geographically and demographically. José Medina and Senator Roth joined me at the first-ever graduation from Riverside Medical School. And it was the same week that they

got their final accreditation, which is a huge deal. But it was beautiful there as I saw something that I've never seen at medical school graduation before. As the doctors took the Hippocratic Oath, which is very common, they had different graduates, different new doctors recite a section of the Hippocratic Oath in every language represented by the student body at the school. And so you heard in a dozen languages people reiterating a section of the Hippocratic Oath. I think it's going to be one of the most diverse medical schools around and most focused on serving the medically underserved.

José: That's great. Thank you very much for that. That's very insightful. I had an opportunity to organize the Latino Physicians of California years ago with Dr. José Arevalo. I'm sure many champions of diversity in medicine are going to be enchanted to learn about this. And I know that Dr. Arumbula is very passionate about the Central Valley and the lack of physicians committed to such critical service in that area. So these are all solutions. But talking about management is good. It sounds like it's moving in the right direction. How about access for the students, the different population groups? I know that the testing process is something that the UC system has been looking at to enhance admission into the university. Can you talk a little bit about that?

John: So under the Master Plan for Higher Education, the University of California is supposed to serve the top 12.5 percent of high school students throughout the state. And additionally, what we say is for every two high school students that we admit, we admit one community college transfer so that we can represent the totality of folks who are ready to come to UC. There's always a question about how you define that 12.5 percent in the 1960s. The university started looking at using standardized tests as one of the key markers. And then in 1997, they adopted it as a permanent tool. And what quickly became apparent was standardized tests, as they're currently structured, are not good indicators of student success. And quite frankly, in the last couple of years, we've seen evidence to suggest that standardized tests are a better predictor of somebody's family's economic wealth as opposed to their ability to do well with the subject matter and move forward academically. And we started 19 months ago to look at the use of standardized tests. We went back and looked at the work from the 1990s that looked at this in a bunch of data from faculty members across the state. In the end, the Academic Senate Committee that was charged with doing some of this work recommended that we take nine years to move away from standardized tests.

The regents last month took actions that we're not waiting nine years. And so immediately we took an action that says over the next five years we will develop a new test. And if that new test gives us predictive value without having the unintended consequences of stratifying class, then we'll use it. And if it doesn't, we won't. And so for the next two years, students are welcome to submit standardized tests SAT and ACT. But if they don't, we won't hold it against them. And in two years following that, they could choose to submit them, but we won't use them at all for consideration in admissions. We'll use them to study a variety of things, but they won't be used for admission decisions. This is a fundamental shift in the way higher education universities around the country will start looking at admissions. And so here's what we know. One-third of our students who transfer already were being admitted without the use of standardized tests. And in six of our nine campuses, standardized tests were only one of 14 criteria that were used to evaluate somebody. So taking away that one criterion, well, will not in any way impede our ability to evaluate freshman admissions. But it's a step toward justice in that we won't be using a marker that has way too much-confounding data based on class. We shouldn't evaluate the worth of our students based on the net worth of their parents.

José: Very powerful. So do you see that change increase the probability the student body makeup will look closer to the makeup of Californians?

John: So I think it'll help us, especially with better demographic representation across the state. And it'll probably help us with geographic distribution across the state, given the alignment of economic status and geographic distribution. It'll probably help us with racial demographic representation, as well. But that wasn't the singular driving principle; it was taking out something where we felt the unintended consequences are greater than the value provided by the test.

That decision was made by unanimous vote. We built, over time, space for us to have these very difficult conversations and ultimately, a unanimous resolution. And that's important in terms of our commitment and our signal to the rest of the higher education community.

José: Ok, great. That's outstanding. We have a mutual friend, Art Torres, who is going to be joining the UC Regents. And so, by him joining the UC regents, what new element might he

bring to the table? Perhaps you can anticipate maybe new insights, new directions, any new dynamics?

John: So let me just say this about Art Torres. He, after he was in the assembly, went on to serve in the Senate, and I grew up in his Senate district. OK. And, you know, I followed his career. And we became really good friends over 25 years ago. So much so that last July when I became chair of the board, it was Art Torres who I asked to swear me in as chair of the regents. OK, so I look forward now this July, as the chair of the Board of Regents, to swear him in as a regent, kind of a beautiful symmetry for me in that, as well. Look, in my opinion, Art Torres is one of the most brilliant legislators ever to serve in the California Legislature. And when you look at his work there, when you look at his work when he was chair of the Democratic Party, when you look at his work since, I think what he's going to bring to the board is a heightened focus on the public mission of the University, making sure that we not only maintain our role as the preeminent public research university in the world but that we do so mindful of our obligation to serve the state of California. Look at what Senator Torres has done with his work at the Center for Regenerative Medicine. Right? Taking science and making sure that it is used in a way that advances our collective interests. He's going to bring that perspective and that commitment to the board. And we're going to be lucky to have him.

José: Okay, thank you.

John: Matter of fact, I only have a couple of pictures that I keep on my desk. One of them is of Art and me when I was Speaker, taken in the Speaker's office.

José: What are your long-range plans, Mr, Speaker? Where do you see yourself after this? You are a young person. You've got a lot of life left, so what do you see yourself doing after this?

John: You know, I'm never very good at these questions. I never know until the opportunity presents itself. But in my last six months of being Speaker, somebody sat down with me and asked me that question. It was Mark Baldassare from the Public Policy Institute of California, PPIC. We're at a forum. And he asked me that question. I said, "I don't know. But the next thing I want to do is work with students." And then, next thing you know, I'm the regent and chair of the board. So I've got to be careful that I don't, that I don't jinx it.

But I want to be involved and continue to be involved in more issues that fundamentally change the trajectory of people and opportunity. Right? And so right now, in my opinion, education is the single biggest tool that we have to expand opportunity.

So I think I'm going to stay involved in education issues for a while longer. But quite frankly, being on this board has given me a heightened interest in corporate governance, as well. And I think one of the big challenges we have in this country is that as more and more of the things that impact our lives are corporate, we still don't have corporate boards that look like the country or the state. You saw a couple of years ago Senator Hannah Beth Jackson creating requirements for corporations to have women on their boards. And I think that's important. But Latinos are probably the most underrepresented group on corporate boards. And it not only impacts sometimes the less than smart ways in which they try to market to us, but it also impacts their ability to be corporate citizens and to be smart businesses. And so I may want to get involved in some corporate governance issues when I step down from my role on the board.

José: We have these very active young people led by Neptaly Aguilera called the UC Chicana Latinx Alumni Association (UCCLAA). And, can you comment on that group? What is your perception of the value they bring to the dynamics of trying to connect UC with all Californians?

John: I think that they are the moral compass that holds us accountable. It's been interesting because I've been going around and meeting with him in a variety of places. I'm somewhat involved in the Berkeley Chicano Latino Alumni Association. Again, one of the few things I have at the home office is a award from them from a couple of years back. So, you're touching on the questions that occupy the space that I spend most of my time in. But Jason and I went to Mexico City last year to speak to the system-wide Latino alumni, to speak to academics both from U.S., Mexico and business leaders and environmental leaders from U.S. and Mexico about how we could use the resources of the university to advance many of these questions. We have a place called CASA de California the University owns in Mexico City. It is the only physical space that a California government entity has in the entire country of Mexico. And during the Great Recession, the previous government, previous president, the university tried to defund it, sell the property, take away our physical presence in Mexico. So, I took savings out of the assembly's operating budget to prop up California during the Great Recession. And then I took

the legislation that I had done to create GOBIZ in the Governor's Office of Business Development and said, "look, we've got to go in and do international trade", and I said that that was the place to do the trade from.

Thankfully, Governor Newsom is now acting on that in trying to do trade opportunities out of that piece of property in that institution that we helped maintain when I was in the legislature. A small example of one of the many kinds of issues that Chicano Latino Alumni Associations are involved in. They're also involved in great stuff like recruiting and helping us land some of the best students California produces and creating real human connections. That's a bridge to the campuses.

I remember several years ago some friends of mine who were also UC alums hosting a reception for ALBE, all the Latino kids in L.A. County who got accepted to Berkeley. But what they did that was different is not only did we invite the prospective student and their parents, but many of the alums brought their parents so that the parent to parent conversation was as important as the student to alumni conversation. And it helped us land more of those students because when you look at the students that are applying and getting admitted to UC schools, they have so many options. These are the best and brightest kids from our community. And we want to make sure we get as many of them to stay in California because that means they're going to be part of California forever. But it also means that we have to be introspective, this university, to make sure we don't have artificial barriers in our admissions or in our recruitment efforts to make sure that we land the students, right? So I was very sad last year. You take a very well-known high school here in Los Angeles, Garfield High School and nine kids from Garfield High School last year got into UC Berkeley, spectacular. Only two of them enrolled at Berkeley. Now, some of them took other great options and went to a comparable university. That's great. But some of them fell through the cracks and went to institutions that weren't going to offer them the same opportunities. And that's when we know we failed. We fail those students if we don't help them maximize the opportunities that are in front of them. And so the alumni associations are very good in helping us hold ourselves accountable in identifying those students and encouraging them to be part of our campuses. But they also help hold us accountable when we miss the mark.

José: That was the last question I have. That's a beautiful interpretation of what's going on with you, with the student body group and with the UC. I appreciate your responses, Mr. Speaker.

John: Can I just say one more thing? In addition to a lot of directors, the active students and many of our campuses, we have a variety of Latino student groups that are actively involved in recruiting high school students. I was involved in one of those when I was a student at Berkeley with what was then called the Raza Recruitment Center. Now it's called the Raíces Recruitment Center, but it's our undergraduate graduate students who are also doing a lot of this work as volunteers, as an expression of their commitment to keeping the doors of opportunity open and expanded.

I don't want to be too Pollyanna. We've made some really good moves, but there's also a lot more work ahead of us right now. I don't want to give the impression that all problems have been solved. I don't want to give that impression at all. These are steps in the right direction. But it's important to stay diligent in each of these skills.

Yeah. I mean, look, it takes some intentionality. You asked about, you know, medical school. I talked to you about Kerry Byington. Look, what do we say? We say we're the premier public research institution in the country. We say that what makes us distinct from a lot of other public institutions is the amount and the type of research that we do. Right? Nobody, nobody else has the volume of research in a public institution that we do. So one of the key roles of the university is our vice-chancellor of Research and Innovation at a system-wide level. And so, two weeks before we shut down because of COVID-19, we announced that we had just hired a new vice-chancellor, a system-wide, vice president of Research. Her name is Theresa Maldonado, PhD, the first-ever Latina to head system-wide Research and Innovation.

So, we have to be intentional.

We're not singularly focused on any one group, but we're saying if we want to be the premier public research institution in the world, we have to have a leadership, a student body and a professoriate that looks like the world. And it looks like California. And there are not enough of us.

And so, we have to look at these diverse, talented folks the way we would look at any other scarce resource. So there aren't enough Nobel Prizes to go around. But we want more than our fair share. There are voices and faces in each of these fields. We want more than our fair share. Because that's how we're going to be able to create more of them.

José: Fascinating, thank you, Mr. Speaker. What a pleasure meeting you and hearing your thoughts about the UC system.