

Sep 26, 2011

Q&A with Suresh Subramani



Many of you know Suresh Subramani as the Executive Vice Chancellor (EVC) of Academic Affairs. And you probably know that he is a highly distinguished cell and molecular biologist. But you may not know that he has worked at UC San Diego for 30 years, or that he is a vegetarian, or that he has two favorite places on this planet and they are nowhere near each other. In this interview, he talks about his responsibilities as the campus' chief academic and operating officer; his long career at the university, from faculty member to EVC; and he gives us insight into the future of education and research at UC San Diego.

What are your main priorities as Executive Vice Chancellor — Academic Affairs?

Subramani: As Executive Vice Chancellor, my top priority is to maintain and enhance the academic excellence of UC San Diego in a socially conscious manner. In doing so, I hope to lead the academic deans and faculty in developing and articulating a clear, long-term academic vision for research and education that will sustain us for the next decade. This must include an understanding that we are close to steady-state, which implies that we must repurpose our existing resources, when necessary, to move into new and exciting areas of research and innovation.

Enhancing the campus climate and emphasizing diversity, equity and inclusion as essential pillars supporting our academic excellence is a high priority. I aspire for UC San Diego to set the example for thoughtful and civil dialogue, as well as creative and constructive solutions, on difficult societal issues. Recruiting, rewarding and retaining excellent faculty and staff is also a high priority, as our goals are not possible without their leadership, vision and support. In addition, it is important that we achieve our campus' long-term plan to grow the size of the graduate program from 15 percent currently to 30 percent of our overall student population in the next decade. Outstanding graduate students are vital to a university's quality, reputation and capabilities. Achieving this goal will require an expanded commitment to fundraising for graduate fellowship support that extends well beyond our immediate objectives of the Invent the Future campaign.

How would you describe the current challenges and opportunities at UC San Diego?

Subramani: Our university's most pressing challenge is to maintain our excellence, reputation and access despite the declining state contributions to the UC budget and an unstable state, national and global economy. We must find, as a University of California system and UC San Diego, alternative revenues to replace lost revenues from the state. And we must keep in mind our clients—our students—and arm them with the knowledge and tools for successful and rewarding lives. In addition, UC San Diego does very well in generating patent disclosures, but we have to improve our licensing portfolio and our industry partnerships so that we fulfill the promise of translating basic research into useful products and therapies — and ultimately help create new jobs — for the communities we serve.

While these are certainly challenging economic times for the university, there are also exciting changes afoot at UC San Diego in terms of education and research. The important thing is that we deal with these changes strategically, with an eye toward future innovation and growth. Much time over the past several months has been devoted to strategic planning with the Academics Deans and the faculty. We, as a campus, need to plan now to position ourselves for the next decade and the next 50 years, in a financial environment that relies less on the state. In doing so, we must find ways to enhance philanthropy and incentivize contract and grants activities, industry partnerships and international links. We must work to revamp and energize undergraduate and graduate education to include curricular changes, with an emphasis on learning rather than teaching alone, using technology to enhance the learning process, and providing hands on experiential training—such as research opportunities and internships—for a significant fraction of our students through an expanded Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program.

Opportunity is also ripe for leveraging our partnerships with colleagues on the La Jolla Mesa to improve research and share core facilities. Though our campus has always been recognized for its interdisciplinary nature, by continuing to enhance our internal and research ties between the general campus, Health Sciences and Scripps Institution of Oceanography, we can leverage scarce resources around common research themes and will be better prepared to take advantage of funding opportunities.

What are UC San Diego's top academic strengths and where do we have room to grow?

Subramani: UC San Diego is a research powerhouse with limitless potential. Perhaps one of our most important rankings is from the *National Science Foundation* which signals our research prowess. In defiance of a less than robust economy, UC San Diego continued to rank 5th among top U.S. universities in federal R&D dollars for FY 2009-10 and 6th in the nation for total R&D dollars. And after crossing the \$1 billion mark in 2009-10 with the aid of federal stimulus funding, we nearly reproduced it in 2010-11, reaching \$960 million in contracts and grants activity. Also, UC San Diego has fewer

academic departments than do many of our comparison institutions, thus has fewer of the usual barriers to integrated research. Our centers, programs and Organized Research Units provide venues to create dynamic and changing interactions that transcend departmental and divisional structures.

Also, for the second year in a row, UC San Diego was ranked first in the nation by *Washington Monthly*, not only for our academic excellence but also for providing social mobility to our low and middle-income students and for what UC San Diego gives back to the community. This is quite an honor, to be ranked above much older and wealthier institutions in terms of our contributions to the region. These accolades and achievements are a direct consequence of the extraordinary commitment of the faculty, staff, students and community supporters to the mission of UC San Diego.

UC San Diego must be prepared to compete globally, thus we must continue to break down administrative barriers to improve opportunities for faculty, researchers and students. Our academic vision for the future must be integrated and focused to leverage scarce campus resources on our academic strengths. In the latest NRC rankings of graduate programs, two thirds of UC San Diego graduate programs ranked in the top 20 nationwide. I challenge us to set a goal of reaching 80 percent of our graduate programs in the top 20 in the next decade.

As a long-time UC San Diego faculty member and administrator, how has the campus and its academics changed in your view?

Subramani: In the past 30 years, UC San Diego has transitioned from a teenager to an adult. Stature, rankings and accolades have grown us into a national brand. The next decade harbors the potential to transform UC San Diego into a truly recognized international name. We are well on our way, but must be strategic in moving forward despite economic challenges.

What sparked your interest in biochemistry? In becoming a professor? In becoming an administrator?

Subramani: My interest in chemistry was sparked by inspiring and passionate chemistry teachers in high school and college. Scientific American articles about the birth of what is known now as "molecular biology" redirected my interest towards biochemistry. Over the years, I have added molecular biology, genetics and cell biology, and now systems biology, to my interests. These subdisciplines represent artificial barriers because the most interesting solutions to problems in biology today are based on very interdisciplinary approaches where the nature of the problem drives the subdisciplines that could be used to solve it.

I was interested in becoming a professor for two reasons. First, being associated with a university, especially one as accomplished as UC San Diego, provides an opportunity for lifelong learning from peers, colleagues and even your students (who, for example, are well ahead of me with respect to IT and the daily use of technology). Secondly, I am fascinated by the quest for knowledge because it is the only thing in this world you can share with others without reservation while enriching yourself personally from the experience.

With regard to my path to administration, I have always been a reluctant administrator primarily because I enjoy research and training so much. However, part of my hesitation also derives from administrative bureaucracies that can hinder creativity and quick action. Each time I have taken up an administrative task (as Chair, Associate Dean, Associate Vice Chancellor and now Executive Vice Chancellor) it has been in response to some bigger crisis where my colleagues convinced me to throw my name into the ring, and involving situations in which I felt I could make a difference with my involvement. I am optimistic that this will be the case in my current role.

Fun Faves

Favorite places at UC San Diego:

My lab for work and Zanzibar Caf   for a break

Favorite place on Earth:

Kauai, Hawaii and Kerala, India

Favorite part of your job:

Interactions with the best and brightest students, staff, faculty, alumni, donors and community members

Favorite way to spend \$10:

Charity

Favorite hobby:

Yoga/exercise and travel

Favorite food:

International cuisines with caveat that excludes anything that moves on its own (a.k.a. vegetarian)

Favorite words to live by:

“Man becomes great exactly in the degree to which he works for the welfare of his fellow men.” -
Gandhi

Keep up with campus news by subscribing to *This Week @ UC San Diego*