



February 23, 2021

Open Letter to California State University Chancellor Joseph I. Castro

Chancellor Castro,

On behalf of the CSU's working parents and caregivers, we implore you to provide COVID-19 relief for spring term and beyond. We are Akhila Ananth from CSU Los Angeles and Michelle Soto-Peña from CSU Stanislaus. We urge you to put your actions where your words are and recognize the critical, tireless work CSU faculty are balancing to keep students learning and families functioning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought havoc to already strained systems of American life – the economy, worker safety, the digital divide, racial, gender, and LGBTQ equity, healthcare, housing and food security, mental health, and education. We are standing at the intersection of hope and despair, values and immorality, and we are wondering which path you will choose.

Faculty are devastatingly depleted. Since the pandemic hit California a year ago, CSU faculty have continued to show up for our students and each other.

We know it's been a while since you have been directly involved in student instruction or service delivery, so we want you to read our stories – to understand the shoes, sneakers, flats, heels, cleats, sandals we stride in daily.

Faculty are juggling the usual workload of lesson planning, teaching, grading, appointment scheduling, holding office hours, mentoring, managing Zoom meetings, counseling, and other CSU responsibilities from home. Many of these faculty are also caring for elder family members throughout the day and shuttling them to medical appointments. Even more faculty are logging their children on to Zoom, helping with daily assignments, reviewing homework, whipping up snacks and meals, maintaining nap schedules, and more. Some children have special needs precluding them from staying online for very long and/or requiring special therapy, tutoring, and medical appointments.

Michelle is a member of the Central Valley community, like yourself, and holds the important title of mother to a two-year-old. Michelle's partner, who is an essential worker in their own right, works offsite from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The schedule has looked

like this for nearly a year without reprieve: 12 straight hours between 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. of juggling work and home responsibilities as the sole childcare provider. This includes lesson planning, grading, answering student questions, responding to work emails and more. Then, when Michelle's partner comes home, the entirety of the evening between 6 p.m. to at least midnight is spent catching up and prepping for the work ahead. Then, they're back at it again at 6 a.m.

Akhila lives in Los Angeles with her partner, who also works full-time, and two children, ages two and six. When her former nanny and two kids lost their housing due to the pandemic, Akhila and her family housed them for five months in their two-bedroom, one-bathroom home. To accommodate the multiple working schedules, Akhila and her partner bought a used trailer to park in the driveway to use as a makeshift office. The CSU's COVID-19 leave program from Fall 2020 provided crucial relief for her and her partner (employed by the University of California) to juggle the responsibilities of a full household, including two kindergarteners navigating two different schools by Zoom and two daycare-aged children with no childcare.

Having seen our colleagues navigate full course loads while single parenting, the expenses of working from home, and less empathetic supervisors, we are more determined than ever to fight for faculty's rights to paid leave for parents and caregivers during the pandemic.

This pace of life is not only unsustainable, but detrimental to our ability to provide quality education for our students. Chancellor Castro, your inaction means faculty don't have the bandwidth to add students from waitlists. We don't have as much time to mentor or write reference letters for students. You parade around programs like the shiny Graduation Initiative, but refuse to provide the direct support necessary for student success.

Faculty are trying to be good professors, lecturers, counselors, librarians, and coaches, striving to meet the needs of their students and serving their universities via necessary committees and work groups. Right now, during COVID-19, stay at home orders, social distancing, and virtual everything, this can be at odds with supporting our families. We're forced to make gut wrenching choices every day – who do we let down? A student, coworker, or a son or daughter?

Chancellor Castro, your working parent and caregiving faculty are being crushed by exhaustion and overwork. We are overstretched and undervalued. And the CSU is not doing anything about it.

COVID-19 relief is needed now, not three to four months from now. Parenting and elder care responsibilities fall disproportionately to women and people of color. By standing idly by, the CSU is watching the creation of a long-term equity gap: one in which the careers of junior, female, and faculty of color are side tracked. During COVID-19, working parents and caregivers have less time and opportunity to devote to research, mentoring, publishing, and other service needed for retention, promotion, and tenure.

Your lack of support, empathy, and action to offer any real relief clearly demonstrates your priorities – maintaining an institutional structure that will oppress its employees.

CFA has proposed a plan that provides one course off (three to four Weighted Teaching Units, as appropriate), or up to 8 hours per week for faculty with non-instructional work assignments for coaches, counselors, and librarians. A course release gives not only us relief should a COVID-19-related reason arise, but allows our students to continue their course without a break. Educational excellence expected for our students continues.

Your team proposed a program of glorified sick leave that does not work for the vast majority of our colleagues. And, on top of that, the proposal is just half the leave that is offered to other staff, and unlike normal sick leave, we must gain discretionary approval by an administrator.

Chancellor Castro, you have an opportunity to initiate real culture change, and to move the CSU toward a humanizing system of higher education. We, like you, are proud to be part of the CSU system. However, we remind you that this is the People's University, the people being the majority stakeholders of each of the 23 campuses across the state: students, staff, and faculty.

Do right by moms and dads and grandparents and caregivers of the CSU system. Do right by the system's essential workers. Do right by the stakeholders of this great and proud university system. Be the leader you say you are.

Have a heart and provide real COVID-19 relief for faculty.

**Akhila Ananth, Associate Professor, School of Criminal Justice & Criminalistics,
California State University, Los Angeles**

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