

CONVERSATIONS WITH MIKE MILKEN



Gene Block

Chancellor, UCLA

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Mike Milken: Gene, thank you for joining us today.

Gene Block: My pleasure.

More than 12 years ago, you became the chancellor of UCLA, the University of California at Los Angeles. This is a campus that, on a normal day, has 100,000 people. UCLA in many ways is its own city. It has been rated as the number-one public university in the United States. It has the most applications of any university in the United States for undergrad and graduate schools. How has this virus changed the way your city, your university, operates?

This has been a remarkable, of course, change for the entire country, for the world, but it's for me very personal and up-close at UCLA. Normally about 14,000 students live on our campus in our dormitories, and that's down to I think less than about 900 students. The faculty are largely gone. Research programs, with few exceptions, are paused. So the campus has taken on an eerie feeling of really being abandoned, literally abandoned, just at a time when it would have been maximum activities. Student groups would be extremely active this time of the year. Our students now are at home learning remotely, and that has been a profound change. We are now providing 5,000 classes online, and that occurred within about a two-week period in March. We literally converted the

entire campus to a remote education campus, and that's unparalleled – certainly in our history – of a transition and a teaching platform so quickly. So you know, the world has changed around UCLA and we're trying to adapt to a new reality as is the entire country, but certainly it has been stressful for everyone.

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Gene, you've obviously spent time as a student at Stanford and in Oregon. You were the provost and a professor of biology at the University of Virginia. Do you think the changes are temporary? Do you think higher education is going to be changed permanently? Or do you see this as kind of a transition until we find a solution for the coronavirus?

I see permanent changes taking place in educational institutions such as UCLA. I'll point to a few. About 85% of our employees now are no longer on campus. We've learned that many can work very effectively at home, avoid their long commutes to campus and improve their quality of lives and improve the environment, frankly. So I think one change in terms of our infrastructure will be people will be working remotely. Not everyone, certainly – some people have to be on campus – but I think there's going to be a permanent change in our workforce, and that's going to have real influence on our campus.

Secondly, although our students and faculty are telling us that remote education is no substitution for being in-residence, we have recognized the power of remote education. The platforms for providing this education have improved dramatically. Faculty have become comfortable with it, and I think we may see more hybrid courses being offered. Little reason sometimes to sit in a large lecture hall for general biology when you can do that remotely, but then break up into smaller groups to come to campus for discussion sections. So I think there's probably going to be enhanced use of online technologies in our education. Although, as I said, there's no substitute for being on campus because there are opportunities out of the classroom that are so important. So I think those are going to be some changes in teaching methodology overall.

And then I'd say, in higher education in general, I think the financial stresses associated with COVID-19 shutdowns are going to have a really profound impact on many institutions. We are bleeding financially, as is every other higher-ed institution in the country, and our losses probably just from the main campus alone currently could be about \$40 million a month – and much larger losses for the health system. Some of that will reverse over time. We know that the hospital will become more normal; operations will begin as patients are returning. I think that's important. Eventually students will

reoccupy the living units, but there has been some significant financial damage to the institution that will challenge us for some time.

Our current crisis has made us acutely aware of the unequal impact of this virus on underrepresented populations. We're seeing that horrifically in the numbers of, for example, African American citizens who have been impacted by the disease. So it certainly has emphasized the importance of making certain we have a diverse student populations so that students graduate from all backgrounds and can help communities.

Gene, you were one of the first chancellors or presidents of a major university who sequestered himself. And a good friend of mine, Arie Beldegrun, who we did a podcast with and one of the great scientist/entrepreneurs in our country who founded a whole series of biotech companies successfully and has been a professor in leading programs at UCLA for a long period of time. You visited with Arie, and he got the virus. What was that experience like for you?

I became alert to the fact that I had been exposed, and it was a shock because I knew this was becoming more and more of a problem in Los Angeles, and there were a number of positive people, but at the time there weren't *that* many positive people. I thought I had really drawn an unlucky hand, and I decided I had to self-isolate immediately. It was important. I had to actually be an example, I thought, to the rest of campus. I immediately went into quarantine and I stayed

there for two weeks, and that was the first phase – that was my isolation because of exposure. And then I stayed on, of course, because the whole city and county then recommended social isolation, but also I felt that I'm not in a youngster and it's particularly important for me to be careful. So like everyone else, I've pretty much remained isolated, self-distancing for the last almost two months now.

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Well to me, you're a youngster. You're a couple years younger than me, and you will always be young in your thinking. That is for sure. The students, the professors, they are creative, they are innovative. You have so many entrepreneurial tendencies among your student body and your research group. Are there any particular student innovations in response to this virus that come to mind?

There were a few. The students really dug in and started thinking how they could be helpful. We had a graduate student who designed a low-cost ventilator prototype using components from Home Depot – thinking about how to build ventilators at the time when we were very concerned that there were not going to be enough ventilators.

Our students and staff in theater, film and television – we have one of the best costume design programs in the country – they started designing masks, designer masks. Then they moved right into the production of masks for our healthcare workers. And I think UCLA and USC business students together participated in a hackathon where they created – using three-dimensional printing – reusable respirator masks.

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So there's been quite a bit of innovation going on among our students, but our students are also involved, along with our faculty obviously, in a major effort called the [Depression Grand Challenge](#). That's something, again, that's really important – there are an awful lot of mood disorders that are going to be associated with the stresses of this pandemic, and both students and faculty especially are deeply involved in that effort. So I would say, you know, in talking about students, they're eager to help. They're doing everything they can to be useful to society during this challenging time.

Gene, you and I have spoken for more than a decade about the issue of a healthy campus. Changing your microbiome – myself for almost four decades here, focused on nutrition programs. With the million-times-faster computers we have today, the ability to measure actually what happens as you eat different foods and change your lifestyle. You might've been among the first campuses in the United States to adopt a [Healthy Campus Initiative](#). We know people with preconditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and other areas are more likely to have serious side effects from the coronavirus. What led you to do the Healthy Campus Initiative? And once again, what did it entail?

This was the vision of Jane and Terry Semel. They said, let's do something really exciting in this area and they established that what is now this Institute for a Healthy Campus and it has been embraced by everyone – by students, by faculty. And again, it's as you say, these are lifestyle changes that make us healthier. It's becoming so clear now with the COVID epidemic that these comorbid factors are so detrimental to your health; if you can avoid many of these problems through healthy lifestyle – you can't avoid every illness by just eating well and remaining calm – but by having a good mental outlook and a good diet, you can minimize the risk for many of the factors that are playing into, unfortunately, the mortality that we're seeing with the COVID virus.

Now what about yourself, Gene? How was your family done? How did they react to you quarantining yourself? And having had a chance to get back to the classroom

yourself, even if it's a telephonic classroom, what are you teaching and what have you learned from this experience?

This has been a very educational experience for me. In the midst of all the problems, there's been some real development on my part in my thinking about higher education. So first, just personally, I travel a lot as you do and probably put on at least a few hundred thousand miles a year, traveling all over the world representing UCLA at meetings in DC or meetings in Oakland or building bridges with a number of institutions throughout Asia and Europe and other areas. That has really changed. The fact I don't travel, the fact that this home – I'm at the chancellor's residence – is normally busy every evening entertaining and we're always bringing a UCLA friends over for evenings. So it's been a bit stark.

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I think I've become a better cook, certainly. We're cooking all of our meals. I'm eating healthier meals, there's no doubt. We have more time to prepare meals and to get much more exercise because I can really discipline myself to get up every morning and get on the treadmill. And even sometimes in late afternoon I get a chance for a little more exercise. So that has all improved my lifestyle. But with stress – the normal social interactions we so enjoy have disappeared. From a personal aspect, like for all of us, it's been a huge adjustment to a more solitary lifestyle that is not something I'm used to, being the chancellor.

As far as teaching, I offered this term to teach an online class. I thought if I'm issuing what we call remote education class, I thought if we're asking faculty to make this quick conversion, I'm going to jump in there with them and learn Zoom along with them. So I'm offering a seminar as part of a Fiat Lux program, which is undergraduate, largely first year seminars for about 20 students. Mine is focused on the COVID-19 virus, but from many different perspectives. Quite frankly, although I teach it, I have guest lecturers each week, and it's fascinating. A few weeks ago, Jerry Kang, who's a law professor and an expert on implicit bias and our vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, talked about xenophobia and how that always is on the rise whenever there are these national challenges. Whether it's World War 2 and the treatment of Japanese Americans or after 9/11 and Islamophobia. Professor Kahn really told the students about what you have to be alert to and the kinds of stresses that can bring out the worst behavior in

people. To Jonathan Fielding, Professor Fielding. Of course that was a public health expert talking about the virus itself.

The class has been valuable. It lets me know how the students are doing and I've had a chance to chat with the students about their experiences with remote education and see them in their homes and dealing with these issues. It's been quite educational. I think the class has been very enjoyable for me. But I also see the limitations of teaching remotely as opposed to having those students all gathering around you and chatting after class. And just the informality of in-person instruction.

Gene, you took on the chairmanship of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities. As you interact with presidents or chancellors of universities around the world as diverse as South America and Asia, what has this experience taught you?

The Association of Pacific Rim Universities is just the right organization to help us better understand how we deal with the COVID-19 crisis. Many of the nations around the Pacific Rim are at different stages in dealing with the coronavirus. You look at Hong Kong, for example. Hong Kong has this pretty well under control now, so they have done a very good job, but they started earlier and I think the infection reached them earlier.

The comparison of having universities that are at different stages, their countries, of development of outbreaks has been very valuable. You get invaluable information from academics that all want the same thing. They want people to remain healthy and they want to be helpful. We've had numerous letters from presidents of Chinese universities asking us, how can we help? We can send masks, you let us know what we need to do. So kudos to these international relationships. I think they really are helpful in times of crisis.

So Gene, as you reflect on this experience over the last few months, regarding the virus, what are the lessons we should take away from this?

I think the first lesson is a reaffirmation of something I think we all recognize: that our world is highly interconnected. It's a worldwide community, and risks are shared more or less equally. That wherever you are in the world, what happens in another part of the world – given the possibilities of infection or the transmission of disease – we're all in this together, literally. This will change the way I think we build resiliency going forward. One is we're committed to building up research programs in this area. You and I have talked about the idea of having an extraordinarily powerful immunology effort at UCLA – ideally to be a world-leader in immunology. That's important. So we've got to, in some sense, think about attracting researchers to deal with these issues so that we can make a contribution on the health research side.

We also have to build some resiliency into the way we plan our campus. We may have to always be ready to have emergency rooms available to isolate students. Whether it's the measles or whether it's a pandemic virus, I think we're going to have to be more prepared to deal with these emergencies. We may have to have more facility to effectively go onto remote education. Although we did a very good job this time, we'll be more prepared next time. There are several areas. I think we have an appreciation that we should become leaders in research areas that can help prevent these types of epidemics from happening in the future. We should prepare our campus for the fact that they will happen, hopefully at long intervals, but we have to be better prepared.

A big part of the college experience is that first day coming into school, moving into the dorms. But there's another extremely important part of the college experience and that is commencement. The culmination of years of effort and work; relationships built with other students, with faculty; and particularly for the parents, a sense of closure on what is often a major financial commitment they have made, and a sense of pride in their children's accomplishments academically and maturing in life. This is an unusual period to think about commencements. What are you doing about this period of time that really is an important memory for most people for their entire life?

Well, commencement for me is the best day of the year at UCLA. To watch families, many first in their family to graduate – 33% of our students will be the first in their families to graduate from a four-year institution. So the feeling of being at an institution where it's really an elevator for opportunity for people is so special. And all that comes out on commencement day. So I was sad. I announced initially that we were going to have a virtual commencement because I couldn't see any way to have an in-person commencement, and I had a terrible reaction to that. People wrote to me and said, give us an opportunity for in-person commencement. I should have realized how important it was. About a decade ago, the University of California relaxed for a short period of time its rule that there can't be honorary degrees, and we were allowed to hold a ceremony for Japanese American students who had been interned during World War 2 and never were able to graduate. We could, 70 years later, offer them degrees. And that's one of the most memorable experiences in my wife's and my life, going to this commencement which I participated in with, sometimes the children if

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it was a posthumous degree, and in some cases the actual Japanese Americans who had to leave the university for their commencement.

So I should have recognized how important this is to students. I walked back my decision. I told the students that we're going to rethink this; maybe we'll have a virtual plus an actual real graduation in-person at a later date. I think commencement is really important for students. It's a sense of closure. It's also a sense of new beginnings. It really completes one phase of their life and begins another, and we're going to make certain that our students get that experience even if it's somewhat delayed.

Gene, not just myself but my entire family has enjoyed our long association over the years with UCLA: my wife, Lori, who served on the boards; my brother, Lowell, who's launched programs, particularly in recent years at the law school. UCLA is a large part of our family community, and we have cherished this relationship. I look forward to the work you're going to do in the future, and once again thank you for joining us today.

I want to thank you, Michael. Thank you for your family's engagement with UCLA that has been so important to us, and I appreciate all that you're doing to improve human health. Appreciate it.
