

## CONVERSATIONS WITH MIKE MILKEN



### **Carol T. Christ**

Chancellor, University of California, Berkeley

*July 16, 2020*

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**Mike Milken:** Carol, it's wonderful to be with you today.

Carol Christ: Thank you so much for inviting me to do to this conversation.

I remember when I arrived on the Berkeley campus in February of 1964. Every idea, every group was represented. And the symbol of Berkeley, the Free Speech Movement, starting in the fall of 1964. Today we're talking about a period of more than 55 years later, where the world has been turned upside down by a coronavirus. Maybe what we've done was not enough on being an anti-racist society. My thoughts, once again, turned to Berkeley.

You arrived at Berkeley in 1970. You were there for almost 30 years. Today, you are at the center in many ways of original thinking, of research, of students expressing themselves.

Berkeley is such a different place now than it was in 1970. First of all, Berkeley was largely a white campus in 1970. Now it's not a white campus anymore. It reflects the diversification of the population of California, of our country. But there is also a lot of continuity between the Berkeley of 1970 and the Berkeley of now. It is a place where history happens, whether that history is social history as in the Free Speech Movement or its scientific history in the extraordinary discoveries that have taken place at Berkeley.

There is not a subject on the face of the earth that somebody doesn't really know about and is creating new knowledge about. It has just a profoundly different culture; one that I think creates Berkeley's extraordinary dynamism and energy.

**When you signed up to become chancellor a few years ago, you didn't know they were going to have these sequence of events in the first half of 2020, which in fact, in many cases, changed your relationship, physical relationship with a student. Take us back to your experiences here during the last six months.**

For me, the light bulb moment came in a talk that I heard by Nicholas Jewel. He's a biostatistician on our faculty, in the school of public health. And he made it very clear how exponential the growth of this virus was going to be, and how every day of delay in moving to remote operation was going to cost lives. The very next day, March 8th, I pulled my cabinet together and we decided we were going to announce the next day, Monday the ninth, that we were going to go to remote operation. We were one of the first schools that did that.

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I've seen the most extraordinary dedication on the part of our faculty, on the part of our students, even though we're all existing in this weird isolation. They're coming together, virtually. We have so many faculty who were changing the focus of their research to focus on COVID-19. Jennifer Doudna, the discoverer of the CRISPR-Cas9 mechanism for intervention in genetics, has made a robotic testing lab that will have the capacity to do 3,000 tests a day. People are working on the fundamental biology of the disease. This is an extraordinary historical moment. And I'm so proud that Berkeley is just stepping up and fully engaging it. Despite the fact that if you were to come to campus today and walk around, it will look deserted to you. There are very few people that are walking around the physical campus, but there's an enormous amount that's going on in people's laboratories, in their libraries, and in their conversations with people.

People are really coming together and realizing that this is our challenge. There's a very moving moment in the Lord of the Rings where Frodo says to Gandalf, ‘I wish I had not lived in these times’ and Gandalf says back to Frodo, ‘so do we all, but what we need to do, how we'll be judged, is what we do with the moment that's given us.’ And that's what I feel. And I think our faculty had been extraordinary.

I also feel exactly that way, Carol. We redirected all the 10 centers of the Milken Institute to focus on their own area, whether it was financial and economic safety nets or whether it was prevention. We have a Center for Public Health; 50 percent of all economic growth in the last 200 years can be traced to public health and medical research. The schools of public health are back in the forefront. Talk to us a little bit about what you saw the responsibilities of the School of Public Health at Berkeley. I am sure you turned to them to play a more important role in the activities during the last six months and in the future. Talk to us a little bit about that interaction.

The school of public health is key to our management and leadership in this crisis. It's the research that's going to help us understand the virus, create a vaccine, create therapies

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that are going to cure the virus. But data science has become extraordinarily important. It's understanding what we know about this disease, through the analysis of huge amounts of data. We have a very interesting study that's going on right now, that is being led by two professors in public health. They're studying cohorts of students and staff that have returned to campus and that haven't returned to campus, trying to figure out what the incidence of the virus is. There's so much that we don't understand about the transmission of the virus, the control of the virus, and public health is absolutely essential to that. We're at Berkeley, I think particularly an interesting place for the

study of public health because we don't have a medical school. Our school of public health is deeply committed to social justice, and they apply an equity lens to much of their research in public health.

**As you've interacted with chancellors and university presidents throughout the country on opening physical classes in the fall. What are your decisions? When do you have to make decisions? How are you basing those decisions?**

We're all in a very similar place that we're all in a hybrid mode in the fall on which there'll be some in person instruction, but most instruction will be remote. None of us are having all of our students back to campus. We made a set of announcements in mid-June about what we're doing, but I think that one of the things this crisis has taught us is that we have to be flexible and conditions on the ground may change, and we may have to

change our plans. The pandemic's worsening is of grave concern to me and to my fellow presidents and chancellors. We're looking very carefully at our choices in the fall.

We've been guided in all our decision making by four principles: protect the health of the community; sustain the continuity of research and instruction; save as many jobs as possible; and apply an equity lens to all our decision making.

**How do you run a university financially with expenses you never had before, with social distancing and other issues? The dorm system, the housing system, has less demand. Are we going to charge the same tuition if we're digital, as if we're physical? And the fact that over a long period of time since I arrived on campus in the mid-sixties and you in 1970, the contribution to the university that the state makes as a percentage of the revenue keeps going down every year.**

This pandemic has created a financial crisis, not just for the country, but for most colleges and universities. I divide the financial problem we have into two large buckets. The first bucket has to do with what we call auxiliaries.

Those are things like our residential life system, athletics, Cal performances, which is our presenting organization. These are parts of the university that take in revenue in direct exchange for services. They've taken a huge hit.

Then there are the core operations of the university; they're financed for the most part by tuition, by the state allocation. Those are also taking a hit. We don't know if our international student population will be the same in the fall as it's been in the past. That will mean there'll be a tuition yet

we will continue to charge the same tuition, and then we've already been told we'll have a 10-percent cut in our state allocation. So, we're dealing with those two portions of the budget differently. We're trying to contain the budget challenges of the auxiliaries to the auxiliaries. And then we just decided yesterday on the personnel programs, we're going to make available to deans, to managers, to limit the expense of their workforce. Everyone will have a budget reduction that they'll have to meet as a way of meeting our deficit.

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**You led a private university for many years, Smith College. Compare and contrast the challenges of running a private university versus a public university like Berkeley.**

In a private college or university, you can determine what the tuition is going to be the next year; it's the board of trustees that determines it, but clearly it's a discussion between the leadership of the campus and the board of trustees. You determine what the takeout for the endowment is going to be. In a public university, I often think about it as you're doing a task with one hand tied behind your back. It's the Board of Regents that determines what the tuition is going to be. In seven of the last eight years, they have not

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approved an increase in tuition. Of course, you also don't control the endowment, which is also held by the regents. So you have much more control over the financial levers in a private college or university you just don't have in a public university.

[Take us back to the day that you made the decision to become the chancellor at Berkeley. In the sense you were coming home, and you set forth, I'm sure some objectives when you made those decisions. And how, if at all, they've changed because of the events of the first six months of 2020.](#)

I came back to Berkeley to retire when I finished being president of Smith. And then I was asked, because the provost resigned very suddenly, to be the interim provost. It's a job I had done before. There was a search for a new chancellor. I didn't think I was interested in the position. I told lots of people that I wasn't, but then I came to see that there were things that I could do both, because of the depth of my relationships, and also because I didn't have any ulterior motives. I was just doing what I'm doing the job because I love the campus and felt that I understood what was important for the campus. I had to create a new financial model for the campus; the campus had \$150 million structural deficit. I eliminated that deficit. Now I'm plunged into another deficit, but we've made a lot of progress with a different financial model. I wanted to advance the extraordinary research that Berkeley does. We defined five major areas of priority: climate change and environmental justice; the future of human health; the future of democracy; economic inequality; and the relationship of artificial and human intelligence.

I've been asked often since the pandemic struck, how do you think about those five goals? They seem to meet even more important than they did when pre pandemic. We decided these were the right goals for the university. We have to be focused on the day after, that though, the pandemic is taking so much of our energy right now in addressing it. There will be a day after. And institutions, organizations of any sort have to have a very clear sense of what their mission and goals are in that day after. That's what I spend a lot of my time thinking about, in addition to the day-to-day decisions about the pandemic.

**As you think of these five areas, in many ways they're all interrelated. How did the various schools at Berkeley respond to this? So, you know, if I'm working in the mathematics department, if I'm working in the physics department or chemistry or biology, or I'm in the business school, was it a collaborative effort between them that you were trying to bring together?**

That's a very acute question, you can probably see from those five categories, they all have a conjure of social justice lens that shapes them. There's some people that feel that they didn't emphasize enough basic research. These five ideas came from the faculty; they weren't my ideas. For the most part, people have really engaged them; the more they live with them, the more they've realized how relevant they are to the work that they do every day. And I think this pandemic has only increased a sense of their urgency.

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**Speaking of the equity lens, obviously, one of the main subjects that's been focused on is the issue of affirmative action. California passed a proposition in 2009, which essentially prohibited universities from considering race, sex and other factors in admissions. More than 50 percent of all the children under 20 in the state of California are now of Latin-American ancestry. The fastest-growing population in California is of Asian ancestry. And your focus also on equal opportunity for African Americans. How do you balance the challenges and deal with this issue at the university?**

As you know, the repeal of Proposition 209 is going to be on the ballot in November. I very much wish we had the tool of taking race, gender, and ethnicity into account and decisions, because I think it's an important way of advancing social justice. I believe very strongly that the university needs to reflect the composition of the population of the state of California. One of the elements in Berkeley's strategic plan is to become an HSI – that's a Hispanic Serving Institution – within 10 years. That means that at least 25 percent of your students are Hispanic. We're at about 14 percent now. That's a very important institutional goal for me. Another really important institutional goal is to increase the proportion of African-American students; we're currently 3 percent African-American students at Berkeley. When I joined the Berkeley faculty, it was 3 percent women; I know what it feels like to be 3 percent. It's very isolating. So, equity and belonging are very important goals for me in regard to the student body.

Chancellor, I want to thank you for joining us today. We couldn't be happier that you are the chancellor during this period of crisis. Your decades of knowledge and wisdom of higher ed. In many ways world's dependent on solutions coming from Berkeley, and I particularly look forward to the day that I can return to campus and walk those beautiful grounds with you again.

Well, thank you, Michael. Thank you for the conversation.

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