

Recap: “General Counsel Speaker Series – The University Lawyer”

By Kian Tamaddoni, J.D. Candidate 2016 | September 14, 2015

On September 10, 2015, the Berkeley Center for Law, Business and the Economy ([BCLBE](#)) welcomed Charles F. Robinson, the University of California’s general counsel, for a Q&A discussion about his career, the role of the University’s top lawyer, and the legal challenges currently facing the University.

A graduate of Harvard University and Yale Law School, Mr. Robinson was formerly a litigation partner at the law firm of Heller, Ehrman, White and McAuliffe in San Francisco. He then took on a series of in-house positions in the private sector before becoming a Vice President and Chief Legal Officer of the University of California in January 2007.

When asked what he loves most about his job, Mr. Robinson quickly conveyed his support for the University’s mission of combining academic excellence with access for the underprivileged, boasting that 40-45% of UC students are Pell Grant eligible. Mr. Robinson also expressed appreciation for the diversity and complexity of his job.

The diversity of legal issues faced by the UC system is only partially illuminated by the Office of the General Counsel’s ([OGC](#)) five departments: (1) Litigation; (2) Labor, Employment and Benefits; (3) Business Transactions and Land Use; (4) Education Affairs, Campus Services, Public Accountability and Governance; and (5) Health Law and Medical Center Services. Mr. Robinson likened the OGC to a mid-sized law firm that advises and represents the UC system, regents, university president, individual campus chancellors, and other high level administrators in over twenty distinct areas of law. While some of his time is spent reviewing budgets, performance reviews, and other administrative tasks, Mr. Robinson also oversees approximately 85 lawyers spread across the many UC campuses, medical centers, national research laboratories, and the OGC’s central office in Oakland.

The diversity of legal work handled by the OGC is enhanced, Mr. Robinson explained, because each UC campus is at its own particular stage of development and has its own unique set of legal challenges. UC Merced, for example, is a relatively young and growing campus facing numerous land-use and real estate questions. UC Berkeley and UCLA, by contrast, are much older and have long-established research programs, so their legal issues tend to focus on that area.

Calling the University of California an “innovation engine,” Mr. Robinson noted that, although the University owns one of the largest patent portfolios in the country, it has become much more entrepreneurial in recent years, with commercialization and international collaborations being at the forefront of legal issues facing the organization. In order to meet that growing need, Mr. Robinson intends to hire more lawyers to work at the OGC over the next two or three years. On paper, he will be looking to hire seasoned transactional lawyers capable of both documenting and structuring the University’s most important deals. As for the intangibles, Mr. Robinson said that

smarts, creativity, demonstrated problem solving, and a profound commitment to the University of California would characterize the future of the OGC.