

Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For Meeting of September 18, 2024

TASK FORCE ON INSTRUCTIONAL MODALITIES REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The consideration to offer fully online undergraduate degree programs at the University of California has been a decades long conversation, complicated by a particularly vexing tension. On one hand is the cautious posture to avoid harm to students and the University and prevent erosion to high-quality education. On the other is the bold desire to innovate instructional modality and pedagogy and increase student access to the University. An implementable path to ease this tension is by moving forward with pilot online programs that are appropriately resourced to deliver sustainable high-quality education, intentionally limiting enrollment to a relatively small number of students. These programs would be rigorously designed for data flows to allow examination of student academic and service outcome differences, if any, between online and in-person modalities. UC Online, a UCOP apparatus that has been providing online course design and development assistance, may become a more impactful and innovative partner by supporting the policy, compliance and infrastructural elements of online education within the University. Individual UC campuses with enthusiasm to offer degree-granting online programs are recommended to consider adoption of the five principles enunciated in the Foundational Principles of Online Programs and Instructional Modalities below. This guidance provides scaffolding to mitigate the serious hazards of online degree programs found outside UC and center multifaceted student interests in all aspects of program creation.

Foundational Principles of Online Programs and Instructional Modalities

- I. Conferral of a single UC baccalaureate degree without online designation.
- II. Delivery of online instruction by UC faculty (as defined in Academic Personnel Manual (APM) – 110(15)), reflecting the most current research.
- III. Utilize consistent admissions criteria for students selecting online degree programs and students selecting in-person degree programs.
- IV. Maximize student access and success for diverse learners, regardless of undergraduate degree program modality, in online and in-person course and program design, development, and approval, including:
 - a. Deployment of effective pedagogical practices in support of diverse learners.

- b. Provision of essential devices (laptops, keyboards, headphones, etc.) and licenses for students from underserved communities.
 - c. Review and assessment of student success outcomes in both online and in-person degree programs, with the goal of eliminating equity gaps.
- V. Ensure equitable access to the UC ecosystem of academic programs, facilities, and support resources for students enrolled in hybrid or fully online undergraduate degree programs, including:
 - a. Equivalent on-campus experience in the areas of UC student success services (tutor, career), campus facilities (library, athletics), health care benefits, networking and research opportunities, and off-campus programs (study abroad).
 - b. In-person education experience, including change to an entirely on-campus experience, is permissible, subject to space and satisfying program prerequisites.

Overview

The Presidential Task Force on Instructional Modalities and UC Quality Undergraduate Degree Programs, co-chaired by Steven W. Cheung, Vice Chair of Systemwide Academic Senate, and Douglas M. Haynes, Interim Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs and Academic Programs, was convened by UC President Drake in December 2023. The Task Force was charged to focus their work on the examination of several key interrelated areas of undergraduate instructional modalities: current status of online undergraduate courses, majors and minors, and programs; characteristics of a high-quality UC education; infrastructure and resource needs to support online degree programs; and distance education compliance with governmental and accreditor regulations. Four interactive Task Force subgroups were formed to approach these areas analytically, enriched by data where possible.

Beyond examination of key areas, another objective of the Task Force was to develop guidance for individual UC campuses that may wish to create fully online undergraduate degree programs, which must necessarily be grounded in Academic Senate regulations on admissions, courses and curricula, and requirements for the conferral of bachelor degrees. The Task Force sought to reconcile opportunities and challenges surrounding degree-bearing undergraduate distance education, guided by a set of five principles embodied in the Foundational Principles of Online Programs and Instructional Modalities. These principles center student success and student experience as top priorities to support those who choose to enroll in fully or partially online undergraduate degree programs.

The Task Force met five times between February and May, culminating in the delivery of a final report to President Drake. These full task force meetings were supplemented by individual meetings of the designated subgroups. Interspersed among meetings were surveys and queries directed at Task Force members to shape its work. Undergraduate deans and student leaders were interviewed to capture their perspectives on the feasibility of creating equivalent student services delivered remotely and University Librarians were consulted to solicit feedback on the intersections of online programs, library service, and infrastructure. On May 1, 2024 the co-chairs presented an update from the Task Force at the Systemwide Academic Congress on The

Evolution and Possibilities of Online Education. The Congress featured thought leaders on instructional design, student engagement, assessment integrity, remote laboratory experience, artificial intelligence in tutoring and teaching, and closing access gaps – relevant topics that deserve comprehensive examination prior to offering fully online undergraduate degree programs at the University.

Building on UC's Online Educational Experience

The University has had over two decades of experience offering online undergraduate courses in earnest systemwide, refining and enhancing the traditional in-person education experience, and investing in measures to address changing student needs and expectations, and to support faculty sponsored innovations in instructional modality and pedagogy. An evolving online education internal resource has been UC Online, which began in 2010 and currently provides access to online courses across the UC system for any UC-enrolled student. UC online is completing its first major strategic plan to become a more impactful and innovative partner. A new chapter for online education at the University was launched in fall 2023 through the Creative Technologies major at UC Santa Cruz, a hybrid online and in-person interdisciplinary arts and design major incorporating an augmented assessment regimen.

Grounding Online Undergraduate Degree Programs in UC Quality Expectations

First-rate education at the University draws from quality aspirations of the faculty and its provision must meet or exceed rules and regulations of accreditation and governmental bodies. The Academic Council recently endorsed an updated statement on characteristics of undergraduate education quality ("Characteristics of Educational Quality at the University of California"). The University Committee on Educational Policy statement describes the quality of a UC education fundamentally deriving from three key components: training and expertise of UC faculty, ability and engagement of UC students, and a rich research-based environment central to the UC system. Accreditation of all UC undergraduate degree-bearing programs must meet the standards of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), regardless of modality. WASC standards are built on the Code of Federal Regulations Part 600, Institutional Eligibility Under the Higher Education Act of 1965 (34 CFR Part 600). Online programs where 50 percent or more of instruction is delivered by distance education undergo additional review, in excess of what is required for in-person programs. A critical requirement for current WASC accreditation is regular and substantive teacher-student interaction. Courses that offer asynchronous online instruction without WASC-defined engagement activities are categorized as correspondence courses, limiting student access to federally approved financial aid. Recently proposed changes to regulations, if approved, would require increased reporting to regulators regarding student outcomes enrolled in online education. Out-of-state access to UC online education requires definitive agreements for each state where UC serves those students, as California is the only state that does not participate in the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) system. Student access to federal and California State financial aid for approved degree programs is independent of instructional modality.

High-quality UC education is non-negotiable and cannot be compromised with any growth initiative to expand access or extend reach. This unwavering commitment to excellence is

especially important in view of documented abuses associated with fully online programs outside UC that rely on the third-party services of an Online Program Manager (OPM) with alarmingly negative impacts on low-income and underrepresented minority students. Without careful attention to student success, fully online undergraduate degree programs may aggravate rather than mitigate persistent inequities in education outcomes, particularly among those from underserved communities. While UC has not utilized OPM services in any material manner for degree-bearing undergraduate programs, it should continue to resist budgetary pressures to do so and instead, make investments to construct internal resources that would support service elements of the historical OPM. The 2024 report from the California State Auditor on the utilization of OPMs in extension courses at UC highlights these dangers.

Online degree programs must align with priorities of academic programs, be propelled by subject matter teacher-scholars, undergo requisite review by campus Divisions of the Academic Senate, and be supported by libraries at the campus and systemwide levels. Such commitments will entail significant and ongoing investments to build and fortify instructional, data, and library infrastructure, and technical support capacity for course design and production, content licenses, and pedagogical tools; and to provide training for teachers and essential devices for students. Faculty are and will be indispensable to promoting a robust learning ecosystem, starting from course design and implementation, moving to assessment and reflection, and returning to continuous improvement by iteration and modification. Faculty teaching in the online modality must be accorded opportunities to augment their pedagogical capacities and be reviewed and rewarded appropriately, as is the case with other activities demonstrating teaching excellence.

Assessments to Propel Effective Learning Environments

The promise of UC fully online degree programs is not a panacea for underinvestment-related challenges roiling higher education. Rather, it is a potentially transformative vehicle to expand access to and extend the reach of select high-quality UC undergraduate programs suitable for online instruction. It will require confronting challenges and seizing opportunities that have been part and parcel of the in-person modality. Among these include defining a set of common core assessments for student academic success, learning outcomes, learning experience, and engagement for broad adoption across the University to rectify ineffective practices and amplify effective ones. Certain campus-based instruments already exist, with opportunities to apply or adapt those measures to the online modality. Another key challenge is implementing organizational procedures that would enable data gathering and data sharing across the University's many locations for novel analyses that could be deeper and richer and yield more actionable insights to guide decision-making across the continuum of program refinement and abandonment. Indeed, campus assessments that articulate with systemwide goals would steer institutional research attention more toward building and sustaining coherent and robust learning environments.

This data-driven approach may be extended to assessments of remotely delivered support services. Interview and survey responses from undergraduate deans and student leaders for teacher-student interaction, academic tutoring, research mentoring, and social networking pointed to major-specific particulars and individual student preferences as important factors in the effectiveness of remotely delivered student services. Remote career advising was the

exception, felt to be better than in-person. While in-person is the gold-standard, there is leverageable UC experience in configuring remote services for student tutoring and advising, physical and mental health, and research and creative activity, albeit with considerable opportunity for UC to innovate and lead in this consequential sector of the learning ecosystem.

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Data Infrastructure Investment.** The ten-campus UC system has unrealized potential to become the pre-eminent higher education research center to innovate not only in instructional pedagogy and modality, including online education, but also in the emerging areas of virtual and augmented reality technologies, and artificial intelligence applications to education. Assessments of initiatives should be data-driven, both quantitative and qualitative, and take advantage of advances in data analytics that have the potential to identify differences among interventions despite missing data, a common reality of large cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. In turn, deeper analyses may guide the next steps of new and existing programs under review.
- 2. Data Sharing Among Campuses.** Adoption of a set of common core assessments by all campuses for student academic success, learning outcomes, learning experience, engagement, and student services, including academic tutoring and research mentoring, would enable efficient, parsimoniously powered examination of various components of the learning ecosystem. In this scenario, all campuses would contribute and have access to the pooled common assessments data set housed within the Office of the President (UCOP). Individual campuses may elect to retain proprietary rights to data collected outside data sharing agreements.
- 3. Fully Online Undergraduate Degree Pilot Programs.** The invariant recommendation across deliberations at multiple time epochs for mounting fully online undergraduate degree programs has been to start with pilots. It may be ideal to initiate the campus-sited first pilots for impacted majors, where facility constraints preclude greater enrollment of otherwise qualified students, to enable examination of common core assessments for differences between or non-inferiority of major-specific fully online versus fully in-person instructional modality. In the event interest among campuses is robust, the distribution of pilots should be equitable.
- 4. Successor Task Force for Implementation and Performance of Undergraduate Programs.** The work of this Presidential Task Force is complete, but additional work is needed to assist campuses with the development of online programs and the monitoring of their growth and fidelity to our quality aspirations, and – above all – student outcomes. A successor joint Administration/Senate task force charged to develop recommendations that will be subject to systemwide review is supported by Provost Newman. Its work will be oriented toward the durable need to measure and evaluate the university's progress in online education, while maintaining an equal devotion to the same matters for our traditional in-person undergraduate programs.

Drawing on the expertise of subject matter experts and a diversity of disciplines, the Task Force on Implementation and Performance of Undergraduate programs will: 1) delineate the infrastructure and training needs for fully online programs, and their costs; 2) address the role of UC Online in the delivery of central services, such as, marketing, inter-campus course access and faculty collaboration, best practices in course design and evaluation, and expert advice on accreditation and regulatory matters; and 3) identify key metrics that can be used to gauge adherence to the Foundational Principles across all modalities for periodic reports to the Regents - recruitment, retention, time to graduation, student satisfaction, access to impacted programs, reduction of equity gaps, and others – in furtherance of excellence. The list highlights key deliverables and is not meant to be exhaustive. For example, successor task force deliberations may wish to consider pinpointing bottleneck factors (e.g. provision of general education courses) in degree completion and augmented campus level assessments of quality that would enable comparisons between parallel fully online and fully in-person programs. The work product of this successor task force will invite systemwide Senate review to reach a consensus across the campuses that will guide the development of thriving undergraduate programs across all instructional modalities - face-to-face in-person, hybrid, or online (synchronous or asynchronous).

- 5. Foundational Principles of Online Programs.** Adoption of the five principles by campuses electing to develop and mount fully online undergraduate degree programs would mitigate the serious hazards of online degree programs found outside UC and center multifaceted student interests in all aspects of program creation. The rationale for each of the five principles is as follows:
- I. **Single Degree.** While some institutions purposefully mark the online degree for distinction from the in-person degree, the University has no interest in creating a two-class system of students. Such markings can signal to students and prospective employers reduced value of the online degree, justified or unjustified. The University is committed to high-quality education to all enrolled students, regardless of instructional modality.
 - II. **One Faculty.** The provision of instruction by subject matter teacher-scholars is an important hallmark of a high-quality UC education. While some institutions have chosen to segregate in-person teaching to research faculty and online teaching to largely non-research faculty, the University should continue with its current practice and defer to campuses to determine the instructional workforce.
 - III. **College Readiness.** Consistent admissions criteria for students selecting online degree programs would ensure admitted students meet the threshold for UC matriculation. In several large studies of student outcomes at institutions outside UC offering fully online undergraduate degree programs, admissions review and documentation of student readiness for college does not appear to have been practiced consistently. As principle V.b specifically permits students enrolled in fully online programs to transfer into fully in-person programs, subject to space availability, students admitted to online programs would necessarily also need to qualify for in-person programs.
 - IV. **Student Success.** A student-centered experience is fundamental to high-quality UC education and indispensable to realizing UC 2030 goals to increase degrees awarded.

Regardless of instructional modality, this commitment imposes an enduring obligation to build and sustain learning environments where diverse communities of learners thrive. In reference to online degree programs, this commitment must animate the design and review of courses and programs, the utilization of pedagogical strategies and learning platforms, and the deployment of purposeful assessment of learning that advances student success.

- V. Equitable Access. Critical to high-quality UC education is equitable access to the University's extensive ecosystem of academic programs, facilities, and support resources for all students, enrolled in fully in-person, hybrid, or fully online undergraduate degree programs. Such access buttresses a common standard of expectations while ensuring similar or equivalent opportunities throughout a student's undergraduate career.