

October 28, 2020

To: Shane White, Chair, Academic Senate

From: Megan McEvoy, Chair, Undergraduate Council

Re: Systemwide Senate Review: Online Undergraduate Degree Task Force Report

At its meeting on October 23, 2020, the Undergraduate Council reviewed the Online Undergraduate Degree Task Force Report. The Council also consulted with the Curriculum Committee, which discussed the report at its meeting on October 21, 2020.

The Council does not endorse any of the three options offered by the task force. Even the limits described in Option 1, the most conservative of the three, seem to us to be too far below the bar of what we consider to be a UC-quality degree granted by a research university. While we recognize any of the three options may confer enormous long-term financial benefits to the University, to realize those financial gains would come at the cost of quality and student success (as described in Appendix F, H, and J in the task force report), which would dilute the University of California brand and hurt all our students.

We are concerned about the dangers of creating a two-tiered system, a likely consequence of all three options. Less privileged students may need to weigh more heavily the expense of moving to campus when choosing among in-person, hybrid, fully online options; more privileged students would not need to weigh cost as heavily, and would be more likely to enjoy all the benefits of the in-person experience. In fact, the two-tiered system already exists at UC campuses located in high-income zip codes such as UCLA, situated in Westwood and surrounded by Bel Air, Brentwood, and Beverly Hills. At UCLA, our students are already having to make the choice of whether to live on or near campus or to commute, and we see the divide in our student body, and the negative impact on our commuter students. All three options would exacerbate this problem, rather than ameliorate it.

While the Council does not endorse any of the three options offered in the task force report, members acknowledge the tremendous potential in online education to promote access and equity. Indeed, when we return to in-person instruction, we may want to consider continuing some of the practices we have innovated under “emergency distance learning” during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as holding some office hours remotely to accommodate commuter students, and using video lectures as a component of a class that involves face-to-face interaction, as in the “flipped classroom” model. A better course of action would be to evaluate the effectiveness of different teaching modalities, before moving to create new programs.

During this period of emergency distance learning, we have also come to realize sharply what the on-campus learning environment offers to our students, what online learning cannot replicate. The task force report describes and cites many such elements (see pp 23, 30, 39–40). We add to this list what we call the “serendipitous moment”: searching the stacks and finding a book next to the one you were originally looking for; going to a talk you saw advertised in the elevator; engaging with a professor in the

few minutes after class; meeting someone new in a café. In other words, the happenstance of being among people, rather than in the curated, pre-determined environment of online learning. The opportunity to form deep connections, often lifelong friendships, with fellow students, to feel a sense of belonging in a community of scholars and learners, is an essential aspect of undergraduate education.

If increasing equity and access is the point, then what we ought to consider is how to make our current campus-based educational experience more accessible to all students.

If you have any questions, please contact me via the Undergraduate Council's analyst, Aileen Liu, at aliu@senate.ucla.edu.

cc: April de Stefano, Executive Director, Academic Senate
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