April 4, 2024

To: Andrea Kasko, Chair
    UCLA Academic Senate

Re: Accessibility and Instruction Working Group Report

Dear Chair Kasko,

The Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) reviewed the Accessibility and Instruction Working Group Report. We recognize the responsibility placed on the group and appreciate its work.

Accessibility is vital to UCLA’s mission. A faculty member of CAF said that, while many access problems were standard, he encountered some that baffled him and was very grateful for the Center for Accessible Education’s expertise and guidance. The experiences of students and faculty who have used the Center indicate that it is underfunded and needs more personnel. We believe, and very likely the working group agrees, that we cannot ask for additional efforts without adding more disability specialists and more testing accommodations.

The report includes a proposal that we viewed as a wrong step. It suggests that computerized accessibility training be a new criterion for promotion and tenure. The current three criteria have been worked out over decades and have been accepted across the University. A proposal for this fourth one would unnecessarily provoke strong opposition, would not succeed, and would hinder the committee’s basic goals.

Many faculty would oppose it on grounds of precedent, asking what will be next. Also, UCLA’s computerized programs often ask the user to assent to propositions they may not believe. Here, apparently, the faculty would be required to endorse Universal Design for Learning or some other specific educational approach. Teaching, unlike cybersecurity or harassment, is our specialty, a criterion in selecting us for our jobs. We welcome new ideas, but endorsing them should not be a condition for promotion.

A premise of the proposal was that many faculty will otherwise not participate in the training. In fact, most would participate without extra inducement because the great majority value these goals at least as highly as cybersecurity or preventing harassment.

We strongly believe the requirement for promotion element should be dropped.

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The legal criteria for accessibility adjustments are vague, and necessarily so. What counts as an “undue” burden or as a “fundamental” change in a course? While conflicts are likely to be rare, there should be an appeal mechanism in place beforehand, and appeals should not be settled by a single group. Faculty should have a voice.

An example of a possible disagreement involves the recording of classes. Here there are legal and educational criteria on both sides. Recording can be important for accessibility but it raises problems of protecting the faculty member’s intellectual property rights and, for controversial or personal topics, maintaining an atmosphere where students and the instructor can speak openly. Since many of these rights are held by faculty, in cases where the solution is disputed, they should have a voice.

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Members expressed the view that, compared to students faculty are less informed about the options and approaches on accommodations. Some form of closer partnership between the faculty and CAE might help.

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The committee focused on current UCLA students. At future meetings it might consider how to recruit more students with disabilities. This would be consistent with our goal of achieving a diverse student body and serving all segments of society.

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If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at barry.oneill@polisci.ucla.edu or our committee analyst Lilia Valdez at lvaldez@senate.ucla.edu.

Sincerely,

Barry O’Neill, Chair
Committee on Academic Freedom

cc: Kathy Bawn, Vice Chair/Chair-Elect, UCLA Academic Senate
Jessica Cattelino, Immediate Past Chair, UCLA Academic Senate
April de Stefano, Executive Director, UCLA Academic Senate
Lilia Valdez, Senior Policy Analyst, UCLA Academic Senate
Members of the Committee on Academic Freedom