April 19, 2024

Andrea Kasko, Chair
Academic Senate

Re: Final Report of the University of California Systemwide Advisory Workgroup on Students with Disabilities

Dear Chair Kasko,

At its April 2, 2024, meeting, The Faculty Welfare Committee (FWC) discussed the final report of the University of California Systemwide Advisory Workgroup on Students with Disabilities. Members offered the following comments.

The FWC reviewed this report a month after assessing the report from the Accessibility and Instruction Working Group. While that latter report lacked key details, this systemwide report was much more comprehensive and better written. Moreover, it clearly illuminates the issue that we are in a period of significant growth of students who identify with disabilities. Still, these students have lower completion rates and a lower sense of belonging. The FWC is committed to supporting the academic success of disabled students and generally supports the recommendations in the report. We noted, however, that it is missing any consideration of the impact on faculty, as they are required to accommodate the needs of increasing numbers of disabled students. The FWC would have also appreciated seeing comparative data across the UCs to assess how much is currently being spent on each campus to support each disabled student; we are concerned that UCLA will be under-resourced.

The FWC had the following specific concerns and comments:

1. We strongly support CAE. FWC members again noted that CAE is an excellent resource, performing an essential service by mediating/deciding disabled students’ needs rather than leaving it for individual faculty to decide. By making these decisions, CAE protects students and faculty from discrimination. The FWC strongly supports additional funds being made available to more fully resource CAE, such as hiring additional case managers.

2. Faculty need more support. A central recommendation in the report for the faculty is to make their courses more accessible. While this is a laudable goal, it will further increase the faculty load at a time when many faculty are at breaking point. This concern was not reflected in the report. Moreover, departments/courses will need clear guidelines on dealing with the increasing (but still small) number of students who request unreasonable/challenging accommodations. While full accessibility for all students is an excellent objective, it remains a pragmatic reality that it is unlikely to be possible for all classes, e.g., lab classes. Faculty need further guidance to understand our responsibilities better and set sensible expectations. What happens when the tools available are not sufficient to support the student? Where should the line be drawn to not further support students?
3. Concern about recording lectures. The FWC does not support recording/filming lectures. First, we have liability concerns that the recordings will not be kept private. Unfortunately, we live in an age when some students have been willing to weaponize classroom recordings without context. The FWC is thus concerned that generally opening up classes to being recorded will concomitantly increase the risk of faculty being singled out for abuse. Second, we have privacy concerns, especially in classes where students are encouraged to be vulnerable during sensitive discussions. Recording classes are very likely to suppress student participation. Finally, the FWC notes that mandating class recordings usually results in steep declines in class attendance.

4. Basis for the increasing numbers. The FWC would have liked more information about potential causes for the rapid increase in the number of disabled students. Is this a consequence of the aftermath of the pandemic? Or rather, is it the result of loosening the definitions of how different types of disabilities are identified?

We thank you for the opportunity to opine. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at butlersj@ucla.edu or via the Committee analyst, Renee Rouzan-Kay, at rrouzankay@senate.ucla.edu.

Sincerely,

Samantha Butler, Chair
Faculty Welfare Committee

cc: Kathleen Bawn, Vice Chair/Chair-Elect, Academic Senate
Jessica Cattelino, Immediate Past Chair, Academic Senate
April de Stefano, Executive Director, Academic Senate
Renee Rouzan-Kay, Senior Policy Analyst, Faculty Welfare Committee
Members of the Faculty Welfare Committee