May 3, 2024

To: Andrea Kasko, Chair
    UCLA Academic Senate

Re: (Systemwide Senate Review) Proposed Academic Senate Statement on UC Quality

Dear Chair Kasko,

Members of the Committee on Academic Freedom independently reviewed the (Systemwide Senate Review) Proposed Academic Senate Statement on UC Quality.

The members recognized that the statement is revisiting the very difficult task of defining Educational Quality for hundreds of thousands of students across ten campuses, to help judge what the impacts will be of: online learning, downsizing to meet budget reductions, limits on space, greater use of non-ladder faculty, and “an unfamiliar labor environment”. All of those trends could impact educational quality, but this Statement provides little or no insight into those questions. Furthermore, it does not even come up with a clear definition to tell if “Educational Quality” is high or not, or if it is rising or falling.

A member stated that they agreed with Undergraduate Council that no Statement on Educational Quality which fails to even mention grading and grade inflation can be considered a serious effort.

A member also raised that in discussing “UC Quality” (the “Educational” modifier was inexplicably dropped), the Statement mentions many nice outcomes for UC students, that might happen in or out of the classroom, such as developing integrity, entrepreneurship and principled leadership. It sounds nice for UC to take credit for these benefits, give ourselves a pat on the back. The problem is that most of the education that goes on at UC cannot be said to directly produce those outcomes. In fact whole areas of study, including most of STEM, and probably most of humanities, do not necessarily do that. At best those results might be an occasional, incidental spin-off.

The questions were also presented whether the Statement is implying that a limited set of specific courses, for example pre-Business classes on entrepreneurship, add more to UC Educational Quality than, say, my courses in physics or astronomy? Would I be doing a higher Quality job if a faculty member altered courses to include integrity, entrepreneurship and principled leadership? A member stated that the judgement of such should be left with the faculty who is responsible for the instruction.

A member also mentioned that in the fifth Quality bullet, “Takes advantage of the important social, cultural and intellectual contributions…”, the final phrase “particularly those from underrepresented populations”, should be removed. It unfortunately implies that contributions from other students are not particularly valued, and should not be a basis for UC Quality. On the contrary, all contributions must be valued, and to say anything less than that would put us in tension with the California Constitution, and, depending on how the Supreme Court interprets it, federal law as well.
Another member stated that adding language that discusses how engaging with various members of the UC community could be beneficial and an accurate reflection of the UC experience.

We appreciate the Executive Board’s continued effort on this matter. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at barry.oneill@polisci.ucla.edu or 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