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May 20, 2010

DANIEL SIMMONS, CHAIR
University of California
Academic Council
1111 Franklin Street, 12th Floor
Oakland, CA 94607

Re: UC Online Education (UCOE) Project Plan

The project plan was forwarded to all Davis Division standing committees and the Faculty Executive Committee Chairs for each college and professional school.   Comments were received from the Committees on Planning and Budget and Courses of Instruction as well as the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils, and are summarized below.

Project Finance Plan
The Division supports the letter to Provost Pitts authored by Academic Council Chair Simmons.   Specifically, the Division is concerned that the cost and level of private donor interest was grossly underestimated.   The project6 involves a loan of up to $6,900,000 from UC. Only $748,000 in outside funding has been obtained (Gates Foundations), and this funding is contingent on the course material being made freely available for others to use (see intellectual property below). We are concerned that the funding model has shifted to a risky model dependent upon revenue generated through the enrollment of non-UC students.

A significant concern with funding coming from non-UC students is how enrollments of UC students would be influenced by non-UC student enrollments in courses that have limited enrollments? Traditional course offerings at UC-Davis give priority to UC students, and then extension students are admitted depending on space-availability. If the bulk of the funding comes from students outside of UC how will UC prioritize enrollment for impacted courses?

The project regards large lower division undergraduate courses. There was some concern that we already have more undergraduate demand than we can meet (online or off) calling into question the whole premise of reaching out to international students and others with online courses. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, there are already many competing institutions offering such courses. It is an open question as to whether or not UC will be able to charge as much for these courses as is envisioned and obtain the projected enrollments, given the competition in the marketplace.   The project plan does not include sufficient information to evaluate whether the proposed business model is viable. The claim that they will be bringing money in three years may well be unfounded. As many have said, the hanging/unstable UCOE business model is very worrisome—market competition, differing outputs required by investors/lenders/funding agencies, etc.

Course Approval
The timeline for offering courses is unreasonable, with proposed first offerings of summer and fall 2011. A full review by the Committee on Courses of Instruction (COCI) would be needed. A minimum of 3-months is typically required to ensure proper review by all review committee levels including COCI. It is not clear how review would function for courses coming from within UC Davis, which are typically reviewed also by college course committees. For non-UC Davis courses, how much review would be required by college course committees?

Times for review and approval of courses by college courses committees may vary. In addition, COCI's policy and procedures, ICMS Curriculum (course approval system), and learning activities may need to be updated to reflect the structure of these courses. Currently, there are two learning activities set-up for online courses. The descriptions for each of these learning activities will need to be updated to be more encompassing or additional learning activities will need to be added.

On the relevance of online courses to curricula, the committee shares the concern that the relevance of the courses to larger programs of study may not always be clear. This is less a concern for courses that are clearly online versions of existing introductory courses. Such courses are widely used in degree programs both within and outside of UC, but caution should be exercised when designing other courses that non-UC students might take with the hope of transferring credit to applicable UC degree programs.   Credit earned when completing system-wide courses is not automatically transferrable to the major.   Such transfers are evaluated by the organization offering the major on a case-by-case basis.

The document provides little information about two key issues that need special care in online course offerings, student workload in relation to units given, and methods of evaluation. How will the workload of courses be determined? Is there a plan to have a teaching assistant or reader work through course materials to determine time taken to complete exercises and read (watch etc.) course materials? All courses need to have a fair method of assigning letter grades (or pass or satisfactory), and there is a need to be sure that individuals performing tests and exercises are the enrolled student. Special care of these issues will be needed in seeking approval of courses.

Articulation with GE requirements at different campuses is not clear. Caution is needed here given the differences among campuses in the degree of development of GE offerings and procedures.

Graduate Education:
There was some discussion about the inclusion of graduate education in this online initiative. The premise was that this could have two benefits. First, it might serve as a stopgap measure to cover graduate curricula as programs shrink. Second, it might make system-wide resources more readily available to graduate students (by more fully implementing Senate Regulation 544, which gives students the right to enroll simultaneously in a course or set of courses at their campus and another UC campus) and thus make UC more competitive with non-UC programs.

The prospect of a greater need for TAs may potentially lead to greater graduate student support, but we are unsure that this project can benefit graduate education in any substantive way. Perhaps there will be more TA slots, but we cannot find any evidence that this would be the case. Furthermore, the loan from the UC is funding that could be used for graduate education or other more pressing university needs.

We note that the project plan separates the question of intercampus course offerings; however, for what it is worth, this is at odds with the 2009 Report of Special Senate Committee on Remote and Online Instruction and Residency. The question we pose is simply whether UCOP's (or "UCOE"'s) decision to ignore the Senate recommendation is in the best interest of graduate education. It would seem that there are two potential benefits of improved technological and administrative mechanisms for intercampus graduate curriculum sharing: stopgap coverage as the university is defunded and increased competitiveness with non-UC programs. The intercampus question could be taken up as a separate issue, of course, but our worry is that will mean graduate education will lose out on an opportunity to direct some of the 7 million dollars towards legitimate graduate educational needs. Perhaps the most useful battle line may not be whether or not to develop online education, but instead how to do so in ways that serve graduate education (and other legitimate curricular needs).

Intellectual Property
There was some concern about the efficacy of online education generally, about the hiring of private companies to administer the program, and about intellectual property issues.   The Gates Foundation funding stipulates development of on-line courses that are open source.   How will the UCOE project manage the intellectual property rights with the requirements of the funding provided by the Gates Foundation?

Sincerely,

Robert L. Powell III, Chair
Davis Division of the Academic Senate and
Professor and Chair, Department of
    Chemical Engineering and Materials Science
Professor, Food Science and Technology