Statement on K-12 Online Learning, with Requirements
for Online Courses and Programs to Receive "a-g" Approval

University of California
Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS)

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Introduction

The Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) of the University of California Academic Senate recognizes that digitally mediated learning is growing rapidly and has the potential to revolutionize the way students acquire knowledge and fulfill the requirements for access into postsecondary education. For young people, the use of computers and mobile devices, the internet, and social media to gain information has become a nearly ubiquitous fact of daily life. As one would expect, a growing number of K-12 schools are also employing online learning and other new learning technologies in a variety of ways to meet their students' educational needs. As a result, more and more students are now fulfilling at least part of their K-12 education through courses offered either partially or fully online. These courses are being developed by a broad range of organizations, including schools, universities, and private companies. Other students are attending one of a growing number of virtual schools, in which students and their teacher may never meet in person. Such courses and schools hold the possibility of increasing access to high-quality learning, and, in the UC context, offering the complete "a-g" curriculum, to students who might otherwise lack access due to a variety of factors, including their school being too small or under-resourced to accommodate an advanced course in a specific topic.

BOARS acknowledges that online education has the promising potential to transform the way students learn, and to improve access to educational opportunities, but the committee also has a number of concerns about quality and access that appear to be supported by recent studies. BOARS is concerned that online learning could give students with better access to technology or money to pay for courses an advantage over poorer students and could perpetuate or widen existing achievement gaps between rich and poor students; that positive outcomes of online learning have yet to be demonstrated broadly; that the profit motive inherent in many online providers may be at odds with providing sufficient staffing to ensure an effective online program; and that the method of ensuring the authenticity of who is submitting key assignments is not always evident.

This statement is meant to express these concerns and BOARS' opinion as to the program elements that can lead to a high quality online learning experience. We begin by referencing some of the recent literature and press surrounding online learning as a way of validating our concerns. Then we provide a set of requirements that online courses must meet in order to receive "a-g" designation, and that online programs, schools or districts must meet in order to add online "a-g" courses to their course list.

A Snapshot of K-12 Online Learning (as of Late 2011/Early 2012)

The growth of K-12 online learning is well documented in a recent U.S. Department of Education report on distance education[1] and in the annual review of the field, "Keeping Pace with Online Learning"[2], both published in fall 2011. The Department of Education report provides national estimates regarding enrollment in "distance education" courses by students enrolled in public school districts. In that survey, distance education courses were defined as "courses offered to elementary and secondary school students regularly enrolled in the district that meet all of the following criteria: (1) are credit granting; (2) are technology delivered; and (3) have the instructor in a different location than the students and/or have course content developed in, or delivered from, a different location than that of the students." The report estimates that there were over 1.3 million online course enrollments by public high school students in the 2009-2010 school year, involving credit recovery, Advanced Placement, career and technical education, and college-level courses. The majority of the courses were reported to have used asynchronous internet-based instruction.

Keeping Pace 2011 discusses the many ways in which online programs can be structured in terms of such characteristics as comprehensiveness (supplemental online providers to full–time online schools), delivery mode (synchronous vs. asynchronous), type of instruction (fully online, fully face-to-face, or a blend of the two), level of teacher-to-student interaction and level of student-to-student interaction. This report makes clear that the K-12 online learning "space" is both growing rapidly and changing rapidly.

Of particular interest are two sections of *Keeping Pace 2011*, one on the demographics of online students and the other addressing the question: "Does online learning work?". The first section provides a clear indication that while online learning has potential, there are serious issues that must be addressed if this mode of education is not to exacerbate the already-present achievement gap between rich and poor and between majority and minority students. The report states on pages 35 and 36 that:

> "As our survey results show, the composition of the online student body differs significantly in important ways from the nationwide K-12 population. For those concerned about equitable access to online programs for all students, there is much here that says those concerns are well-founded and need to be deliberately addressed by programs, policies, and researchers."

> "The ethnic differences between the national K-12 population and the online student population are significant but not dramatic. Black, Hispanic, and Asian students are underrepresented, while White and Native American students are overrepresented."

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[1] Queen, B., and Lewis, L. (2011). "Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2009-10 (NCES 2012-009). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012008.pdf.
[2] "2011 Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning. An Annual Review of Policy and Practice." (http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/KeepingPace2011.pdf)

"Online learning for special needs learners is quickly gaining nationwide attention, and for good reason. Several studies have shown excellent results for these students in online programs, but they are severely underrepresented."

"Students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch are also severely underrepresented in online programs."

"For several years, educators have argued that online programs are in danger of replicating the problems and disparities that have plagued our brick-and-mortar education system. At least in terms of special student populations, the data contained in this report clearly validates that fear. Online learning makes it possible to provide a high-quality education to every student. As virtual schooling matures, we all have a responsibility to make sure that nobody gets left out."

BOARS fully agrees with this last statement, and recognizes that UC policies regarding the use of online courses to meet the requirements for admission eligibility must encourage broad access for all qualified students.

The section titled "Does online learning work?" provides evidence that it can be effective, referencing several studies including the positive outcomes found in the 2009 Department of Education meta-analysis of online programs[3] and the strong 2008 performance review of the Florida Virtual School[4]. It also makes the clear point that positive outcomes are not assured simply because the course is online. *Keeping Pace 2011* states on page 40:

"However, just because online learning *can* work does not mean online learning *will* work. As with traditional brick-and-mortar education, there are many high-quality schools, and many that fall short. Many online teachers are well-trained, while others are not. Many online courses are steeped in current pedagogy, while others are not. Determining which courses, schools, and instructional models are creating positive outcomes remains a challenge for all educators and policymakers, but particularly for online providers because they can attract students from across entire states and therefore have the potential to work at a larger scale than most physical schools."

BOARS recognizes that online learning can be effective, and that its policies must take encourage online course developers and programs to adhere to the promising practices that are known to be consistent with success.

Keeping Pace 2011 also proposes several "first principles" to guide ongoing discussions regarding the development on online learning. These are:

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[3] Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2009). "Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies." (http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf)
[4] Florida TaxWatch. "Final Report: A Comprehensive Report of Florida Virtual School." (www.scribd.com/doc/47743217/Florida-Virtual-School-Report)

"Outcomes should drive policy: Data from many schools and states show that high quality online and blended learning can provide benefits to students, schools, and states by providing new opportunities that lead to improved student outcomes. Other data demonstrate that a course or school is not necessarily good at improving student outcomes simply because it is online—nor because it is brick and mortar. Student learning outcomes—using individual student growth— should drive policy discussions.

"Students need options with accountability: State policies should allow for a wide array of online and blended learning options, while setting high standards of accountability. State policies should go beyond simply providing choices for students and parents to, at a minimum, providing options that are held accountable through performance data.

"Teachers (still) matter: Online and blended learning advocates should be clear that online learning requires teachers. The gold standard of quality in any classroom is the teacher. No successful, sustainable, and scalable digital learning exists without teachers. The role of teachers may change in a digital class to look more like a coach, but the need for the teacher does not go away. Digital learning does not represent an alternative to teachers; it presents a new opportunity for innovative teachers seeking new challenges—or seeking to work in a technology-rich environment that is similar to that of most other professions.

"It's not about the money: Digital learning does not equate to automatic, substantial cost savings. Every example of a program with cost savings can be countered with a digital learning implementation that has improved student outcomes but did not save money. While there is some promise for costs savings, additional research is needed on costs and various funding models."

BOARS welcomes these principles, and acknowledges that its policies must encourage the development of online courses and programs that recognize the validity of these principles as well.

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL[5]) has become a leading advocate for online learning, and has played a central role in developing a set of three influential National Standards for Quality Online Courses[6], Teaching[7], and Programs[8]. These standards are a welcome framework through which schools, districts or the programs themselves can evaluate the quality of the online learning potential. The latest versions of the first two standards documents were released in October, 2011.

In August, 2011, the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association published the California eLearning Framework[9]. This important document outlines the issues that need to be addressed in developing a statewide vision of how to implement effective online learning opportunities. It identifies four key components of quality online learning: content and

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[5] http://www.inacol.org/

[6] http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/iNACOL_CourseStandards_2011.pdf

[7] http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/iNACOL_TeachingStandardsv2.pdf

[8] http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/NACOL%20Standards%20Quality%20Online%20Programs.pdf

[9] http://www.ccsesa.org/index/attachments/eLearn_Framework.pdf

content evaluation; teaching and professional development; technology support; and operational issues.

The California eLearning Framework builds on the work of iNACOL in defining the dimensions of quality in K-12 online learning, and on the online course content review that is now being conducted by the California Learning Resource Network (CLRN)[10]. The eLearning Framework also highlights the importance of teachers, noting that "Teachers remain a key part of instruction in eLearning, as successful student outcomes derive from a successful classroom experience – regardless of whether that classroom is in a brick-and-mortar or eLearning environment."

CLRN is funded by the California Department of Education, and in late 2011 began to perform rigorous reviews of online courses for alignment with either the California Content Standards or the Common Core State Standards, depending upon the design of the course. The course reviews involve a detailed content review by California educators in the relevant subject area. This element of the review identifies the extent to which each individual standard is addressed across three levels: whether the course introduces and provides for systematic development of the content element addressed by that standard; whether students have the opportunity to learn the standard through practice; and whether there is any assessment associated with that standard. In addition, each course is evaluated against the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses[6].

While there has been a great deal of positive movement toward high-quality online courses and programs, there are continuing signs that not all providers are moving as quickly toward adopting these standards as would be desired. Recent investigative news reports[11,12] have suggested that some online schools have assigned as many as 250 students to each online teacher. Given the importance of teachers in student learning, there is concern that such large numbers will not reasonably allow the sort of personal interaction and support by content experts that students need.

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[10] http://www.clrn.org/home/#2

[11] Saul, S. "Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools," New York Times, December 12, 2011. (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/13/education/online-schools-score-better-on-wall-street-than-in-classrooms.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)

[12] Hood, G. "Overworked and Underpaid?" Community Radio for Northern Colorado, March 19, 2012. (http://www.kunc.org/post/overworked-and-underpaid-teacher-staffing-colorado-virtual-academy)

University of California
Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS)

Requirements for Online Courses and Programs to Receive "a-g" Approval

BOARS recognizes that while online courses and programs offer students unique learning opportunities, they also present a number of challenges related to quality and access. BOARS has identified the following elements as necessary for ensuring a high-quality online learning experience. We expect each of these quality measures to be present in all K-12 online courses and programs seeking approval for "a-g" credit, and we strongly encourage them to be present in all other online courses and programs offered in K-12.

- All students in a school or district must have equal access to all courses for which they are qualified, regardless of socioeconomic status, disability, or other factors. This concern is particularly relevant for online instruction, where it is an unfortunate fact that access to the internet is not uniformly available, and studies have shown that the demographics of students taking courses online are substantially different than of the population as a whole. Students in low socioeconomic groups must not be disadvantaged compared to their wealthier classmates in access to online courses.

- Online courses must be consistent with the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses[13]. BOARS has identified 15 "power standards" that all courses must meet. Please see the UC Policy for "a-g" Review of Online Courses for more details[14].

- Online courses must be developed by content experts in conjunction with those who understand how best to use the technology involved to enhance student learning.

- Online courses used to fulfill admission requirements to the University of California must be consistent, in terms of content, depth and academic rigor, with the "a-g" guidelines provided by the University[15].

- Online courses must provide opportunities for substantial interactions between students and the teacher, and between students and other students. Learning is not merely the acquisition of facts. It is a dynamic, social activity that requires inquiry, dialogue, exploration and engagement with other learners and feedback from teachers. Students must have access to content experts as they learn.

- Student progress and learning are to be assessed frequently through a variety of tools, and feedback to the student must be prompt.

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[13] http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/iNACOL_CourseStandards_2011.pdf
[14] http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/senate/committees/boars/BOARSOnlinePolicya-g-May2012.pdf
[15] http://www.ucop.edu/a-gGuide/ag/welcome.html

- Institutions offering online courses that are to be considered for admission to the University of California must be accredited by one of the regional accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education[16].

- Institutions offering online courses must adhere to the promising practices found in the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Programs[17].

- Institutions must provide qualified teachers who are content experts and are capable of supporting their students' learning throughout the online course. These teachers must be provided adequate professional development to effectively support students in their online learning, and be assigned a number of students that allows for the interaction necessary to achieve positive learning outcomes.

- Institutions must ensure that the technology infrastructure is adequate for effective learning, and that students enrolled in an online course have access to both the necessary hardware and software required to be successful.

- Institutions offering online courses must provide students entering a course appropriate advice to ensure that they have the necessary background and technology to succeed.

- Institutions must ensure that students have local access to qualified professionals (teachers, mentors, counselors, etc.) or paraprofessionals who can support their online course participation. However, such local support staff must not be expected to replace the teacher as a primary source of content.

- Institutions must have processes in place to ensure that the person submitting material for assessment is actually the student enrolled in the course. While concerns about academic integrity certainly exist for both face-to-face and online courses, there is added concern that the authenticity of the person providing the material could be more easily compromised in the online setting.

- Institutions must be willing to provide performance data on the students in their courses.

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[16] http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/Agencies.aspx
[17] http://www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/NACOL%20Standards%20Quality%20Online%20Programs.pdf