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Academic Senate

Office of the President  
1111 Franklin Street  
Oakland, CA 94607

[senate.universityofcalifornia.edu](https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu)

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UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY (UCEP)

Rachael Goodhue, Chair

[goodhue@primal.ucdavis.edu](mailto:goodhue@primal.ucdavis.edu)

July 31, 2025

Steven W. Cheung

Chair, UC Academic Council

RE: UCEP's Recommendations to the Performance of Undergraduate Degree Programs Task Force Regarding Assessment of Online Education

Dear Steven,

In response to your request, UCEP established a subcommittee to delineate principles for the common assessment of in-person and online courses and programs. During several UCEP meetings this spring, the subcommittee, led by Vice Chair Sugar, described a variety of issues and questions to explore. Members agree upon the importance of creating principles that are not overly prescriptive, recognize divisional differences, and are in alignment with how faculty participate in shared governance.

The overarching goal that should guide assessment of both in-person and online courses and instructional programs is to ensure that they meet the standards for educational excellence laid out in the statement on [\*Characteristics of Undergraduate Educational Quality at the University of California\*](#), approved by the systemwide University of California Academic Senate in December 2024. As a companion to that document, UCEP has drafted a set of considerations and principles for *quality assessment*, which is appended to this memo. While the committee believes that all of the components therein are crucial to maintaining UC educational quality across modalities, they will require varying degrees of time and resources to implement. Therefore, in this memo, we lay out what we believe are the key areas the task force should discuss and specific steps that should be taken in the short term. In what follows, the term "online" collectively references hybrid, mixed-modality, and fully remote educational offerings.

## Core areas of discussion:

**(1) Rationale:** What problems is UC trying to address through online education and, in particular, what are the reasons for offering fully online courses and programs? Possible objectives include:

- **Pedagogy:** Some courses or programs of study may be taught more effectively online.
- **Access:** Online courses and programs may make a UC education attainable for students who cannot easily attend one of the existing campuses in-person due to distance, cost or other obligations. However, they also require students to have sufficient technological resources and a suitable study environment, which are often challenges for this population. Moreover, engagement with program components beyond the (virtual) classroom may be more limited; it will be important to determine at what point an online program is not truly a “UC experience,” such that students might be better served by a California State University or California Community College program which they could access more easily.
- **Scaling/Resources:** Online courses and programs do not have the same physical plant needs as their in-person counterparts (e.g. land, classroom buildings, housing) and so might allow individual campuses, or the UC system as a whole, to increase offerings and total enrollment. However, they also require more and different technical support and other off-campus services which have their own significant infrastructure costs. Some services may require community partnerships since they cannot be provided in the same centralized form as for in-person students.
- **Synergy:** Online courses and programs may more easily benefit from cross-campus sharing, especially for areas with low enrollments, but may also lead to competition between divisions.

We note that the first of these goals suggests a more limited set of offerings, while the latter three would incentivize offering online versions of both the most highly impacted and lowest enrollment existing courses and majors. Making good long-term decisions about priorities for online education will require both a rigorous evaluation of which offerings and students do well in an online environment and a detailed cost-benefit/resourcing analysis. While the latter is probably beyond the scope of the Performance of Undergraduate Degree Programs Task Force, substantial data collection in service of the former should be carried out. This should include both collating historical data from the divisions comparing in-person and online courses, as well as a pilot assessment program going forward (see below). In the long term, assessments should specifically examine whether a given online course or program is fulfilling the goals aligned with its rationale.

## **(2) Unique Features of In-Person vs Online Courses and Programs:**

While ensuring comparability of scope and quality of educational offerings across modalities is a core principle, online and in-person courses and programs may achieve their goals in different ways. To determine an appropriate format for assessment, it is important to articulate how these modalities differ, and therefore where each needs unique components in evaluation. Key considerations include:

- **Engagement:** How does class-participation differ in online versus in-person courses? How does one become part of a community, meet and interact with people different from oneself, and access faculty and peer-based academic support in a virtual environment where less structured encounters are harder to arrange? How does one assess the volume and quality of those interactions for both in-person and online students?
- **Faculty and Mentorship:** One of the hallmarks of a UC education is the chance to be taught by faculty with world-class subject-matter and pedagogical expertise, and to have exposure to and participate in the research enterprise. Assessments should track the comparability of this part of the UC experience for in-person and online students.
- **Access to Educational Resources:** On-campus students have physical access to facilities, equipment, and research opportunities. How will these be made available to students off-campus, and how will we evaluate whether they are adequate/comparable to those of their on-campus counterparts? How do we quantify levels of usage for both in-person and online students?
- **Wrap-around Support Services:** For in-person students, healthcare, tutoring, dining, event programming, and other services are campus-based. How can these be offered to students who are fully online, and if this is done through community-based systems, how can we ensure adequate evaluation?
- **Population Differences:** How should assessments account for underlying differences in the groups of students who choose to enroll in online versus in-person courses and programs? Relatedly, will admissions be done separately for online and in-person students, and what metrics should be used to track/compare the resulting cohorts?

We note that several of the points above pertain primarily to fully online *programs* and thus will not be susceptible to evaluation in the short-term, except through piloting with emerging programs such as the UCSC Creative Technologies major. However, data on class-specific aspects can be obtained as (potentially) can differences between students who do and do not choose to take online courses. Moreover, it will be important to develop assessment metrics for these domains for all courses and programs.

## **(3) Pilot of Assessment Methods for Online Courses and Programs:**

One of the major recommendations of the previous taskforce was the

development of a systemwide pilot program for evaluating online education. Ultimately, assessment of online programs will need to include coursework, academic components outside the classroom (e.g. seminars, senior theses, research projects), non-academic activities supported by the department or program (e.g. community building, mentorship, career-building), and university-level academic (e.g. Centers for Accessible Education (CAEs), writing centers, tutoring) and wrap-around services (e.g. healthcare, housing, food, extracurricular activities), to ensure that online students are getting comparable access, support, and quality of education to their in-person counterparts. Because there are few extant online undergraduate degrees (the exception being the UCSC Creative Technologies major which launched in Fall, 2024), it is premature to do full-scale program evaluation. However, it is feasible to pilot the *assessment process and identify a set of global metrics which will help differentiate in-person and online courses and programs*, providing valuable data on which kinds of material are most successfully taught in each modality, whether there are particular domains which are problem points for each approach, and whether there are particular groups of students who especially flourish or struggle in each environment. Below we suggest the types of global metrics that might be considered at each level, along with possible approaches to collection. In all cases, it will be important to collect not just student satisfaction data but also feedback from faculty and relevant educational support units (e.g. CAEs; Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs)).

**At the course level:** Encourage divisions/departments to add a set of systemwide questions to their student evaluations and course reviews for all online classes as well as a parallel set of in-person courses. Ensure that course evaluations for all UC Online classes include the pilot questions. Historical data can also be obtained from divisions for courses offered in both modalities but may be hard to aggregate/compare across divisions.

Possible sample questions for students:

- Do you have adequate access to instructors and course assistants?
- Is technological support for this course adequate?
- How easy do you find it to engage in the course sessions? How engaged do you think your classmates are?

Possible sample questions for instructors:

- How engaged are your students in this course?
- Do you have adequate technological and other support for this class?
- What seem to be the greatest barriers to student learning in this class?

**At the program level:** Encourage divisions/departments to include questions related to online courses and resourcing in their 7-year reviews. Partner with UCSC to get some early data from their students and faculty about the new Creative Technologies major.

Possible sample questions for instructors/department leadership:

- What differences (both positive and negative) do you notice between online and in-person offerings in your department?
- Do you feel your department has adequate technological and resource support for online classes?
- How does/should your department engage with students who are taking classes partially or fully online? Do you notice differences between students who do and do not take online courses, and if so in what domains?
- Are there differences in issues with academic integrity by course modality?

Possible sample questions for CAE/CTL/other instructional support staff:

- Do you notice differences in attendance/performance/learning outcomes/completion rates in the students you work with between in-person and online courses? If so, in what domains?
- Do you notice differences in enthusiasm in the students you serve between in-person and online courses?
- How well are the students you serve engaging with online courses?

**At the university/systemwide level:** Identify relevant questions from the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) to integrate with the more specific questions above. Relevant topics include how students feel about their overall UC education, support services, and related topics. It would also be interesting to look at global performance metrics for students who did or did not take online courses during their time at UC.

There are several possible vehicles for collecting such data and the task force will need to identify the most feasible approach. Possible options include:

- Working with Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRAP) to get data from existing questions on the UCUES survey. While it may be possible to slightly tweak some questions, changing or adding large numbers of items is not likely to be feasible. However, some of the current questions about overall experience are likely relevant and the survey should be reviewed with this in mind.
- Working with divisions to add the desired questions to student, faculty, and other stakeholder course evaluations locally, e.g. by working with the Registrars' offices, Centers for Accessible Education, and Centers for Teaching and Learning. It should be noted that the ways in

which metrics are defined and measured across campuses may differ and it will be important to think carefully about how this affects interpretation

- Working with UC Online to get a standard set of metrics added to the courses offered through their system. This will be one of the most effective ways to get consistency across different courses.

**(4) Standards for Online Programs:** While data on fully online programs will remain limited in the immediate future, the quality principles in the attached document provide a framework for advising departments and divisions on approaches to developing such programs and the criteria and standards they should meet to gain approval. While every division will approach this process in the way most appropriate to their local circumstances, having a common framework will ensure equity and consistency, and make it easier to evaluate the success of online programs across the UC System. As part of this, it will be critical to work with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) guidelines and definitions in developing courses and programs to ensure there are no unanticipated issues around accreditation or inconsistencies in terminology that may cause confusion for stakeholders.

**(5) An Opportunity to Consider Assessment of Education and Instruction Broadly:** For current in-person classes we have student evaluations and peer teaching reviews as part of faculty merit increases, while broad oversight of programs is part of 8-year departmental reviews, and we get exit data on the overall student experience. In principle, we can get the same things for online courses and programs/students, but we know these processes are in need of improvement and there are features of program success beyond those controlled by departments that may also not be adequately assessed. The rise of online education and the corresponding need to develop appropriate metrics provide an opportunity to revisit how the UC does evaluation for *all* types of courses and programs, as well as non-degree-specific elements, and to articulate areas of key similarity and difference. It will be crucial for the taskforce to include experts on cutting edge assessment methods and to consider how to integrate their recommendations into evaluation of in-person as well as online courses.

**(6) Systemwide Approach to Online Education:** To date, online courses and programs have largely been handled at the department/divisional level. There are potential opportunities for synergy and cost-savings through online initiatives that cut across campuses. However, there are also complexities in terms of integration, implementation and campus divisional autonomy. Some of the key issues include:

- **Housing of Online Programs:** In-person degree programs are, by nature, typically based in departments within divisions. It is less clear that fully online programs need the same branding. Moreover, online programs covering the same content would compete much more directly with one another. It might be much more cost-effective—in time, money, and other resources—to set up a “system-wide” version of such programs, but that would require a new model and have implications for campus autonomy.
- **The Role of UC Online:** UC Online has served as a hub, facilitating the ability of students to access classes offered by a division other than their own and providing seed money for faculty to develop new online courses. However, it cannot initiate or run new pedagogical offerings on its own as it is an administrative rather than academic entity. It will be important to conceptualize the role of UC Online in the development and implementation of new online courses and programs and to ensure careful assessment of its performance.
- **Cross-Campus Articulation:** Related to the point above, awarding of credit for courses taken online through another campus has been uneven. While all students receive units for such courses, whether they are accepted as meeting general education, pre-major or major requirements is handled on a case-by-case basis. Cross-cutting online courses will have significantly less value to students if they cannot be used to meet degree requirements.
- **Obtaining Systemwide Data:** In order to make optimal policy decisions about online education, it is necessary to know more about what each campus is doing in terms of development, implementation and assessment of online courses and programs, and the extent to which these processes and the educational outcomes parallel those for in-person courses. Collection of such data, both historical and forward-looking, is a crucial next step.
- **Standardization of Assessment:** It is critical to have sustainable, systematic assessment of both in-person and online programs, which in turn requires dedicated resources. While the systemwide Senate cannot dictate a common format of assessment for divisional courses or programs, it should articulate principles (see accompanying document) and create recommended metrics for common use through the proposed pilot program (see below).

**Core recommendations:** Based on the points above, UCEP’s core recommendations to the Performance of Undergraduate Degree Programs Task Force are as follows:

- Include assessment experts on the Task Force.
- Identify (through assessment experts, UCUES and other sources) a set of core metrics/questions that would help differentiate quality across and within modalities (exemplars are included in this memo above).
- Work with IRAP, UC Online, Registrar’s Offices, and Divisional instructional resource units to develop and implement pilot collection of

the common set of assessments identified above for online courses, along with similar in-person courses, to allow comparisons across modalities. This will provide the opportunity to test assessment metrics, obtain an early indicator of how online courses are doing (beyond the pandemic setting), and begin to figure out which courses and which students are most suited to this mode of delivery.

- Work with IRAP and the divisions to develop an approach to collecting longer-term programmatic metrics.
- Recommend that divisions ask departments and programs to include specific information comparing/commenting on in-person vs online teaching as part of their 7-year reviews.
- Ask divisions to assemble historical data for online and in-person versions of the same courses.
- When thinking about data collection, go beyond student evaluations to collect data from instructors, learning center experts and others. Emphasize learning outcomes and higher-level thinking, as well as who is taking and succeeding (or not) in courses of different modalities.
- Work with the team rolling out the online UCSC Creative Technologies program to ensure in-depth assessment at a *programmatic* rather than purely course-based level.
- While in the short term, availability of full, program-level data will be limited, the taskforce should provide a clear set of guidelines for development of fully online programs and a set of recommended criteria/standards that should be met for such programs to be approved, including alignment with WSCUC accreditation requirements and terminology.

I'd like to acknowledge the hard work of Vice Chair Sugar, Jason Duque (UCSB), and Tanner WouldGo (UCSC) on this effort. UCEP appreciates the opportunity to opine on this matter. Don't hesitate to contact me should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Rachael Goodhue, Chair  
UCEP

## Principles and Considerations for Assessment of UC Educational Quality

In December 2024, the System-wide Academic Senate approved the statement [Characteristics of Undergraduate Educational Quality at the University of California](#). A critical component of that document is the emphasis on rigorous and ongoing review to ensure that UC courses and programs, as well as the overall educational experience, continue to meet the highest standards of excellence. This companion document lays out a core set of principles and considerations for assessment which should apply across these levels and across modality of delivery (e.g. in-person, hybrid, mixed, fully remote, the latter three of which are collectively referred to as “online”; see the [Standard Terminology Guide for Distance Education](#) for details of terminology), along with level- and modality-specific issues which must be considered to maintain consistency of quality. Assessment of in-person vs online courses is about making sure that students get the same high-quality content and that learning is equally effective, while assessment of in-person vs online program/student type is about the entire academic preparation and educational experience.

**(1) Instructional Quality and Content—Course Evaluation Process:** A core component of any educational program is the instructional quality of the coursework.

- a) UC classes are primarily developed and taught by Academic Senate faculty, along with lecturers, graduate students, and external specialists with relevant expertise. Development and instructional staffing should be comparable across modalities.
- b) Individual courses should be evaluated both at the point of instruction by students and by faculty peers/pedagogy experts (as part of the merit review process). Those assessments can be enhanced by inclusion of questions related to modality-specific issues (e.g. faculty handling of multiple modalities; technological support for online courses).
- c) Courses are evaluated in the broader context as part of program reviews which can highlight modality-related issues across majors and departments.
- d) Course evaluations should consider the following components: Quality of instruction, success at conveying content/concepts and meeting higher-level learning objectives/competencies, student engagement/interactions, success in subsequent courses, fit of delivery modality for pedagogy, and related domains.

**(2) Academic Integrity and Methods of Student Assessment:**

- a) Ensuring academic integrity and validity of student assessments is an ongoing challenge, especially in light of evolving technology.
- b) Online courses and programs may have particular challenges, given the increased difficulty of monitoring.

- c) Course and program evaluations should therefore track methods of student assessment and issues with integrity across modalities, as well as correlate them with student grades and subsequent performance.

**(3) Instructional Quality and Content---Program Evaluation Process:**

- a) All programs should be reviewed regularly, with input from all relevant stakeholders, regardless of modality.
- b) The current 7-year departmental/program review process provides a framework which can be extended to include online programs. Sections should be included in these reviews that address modality-specific advantages and challenges and explicitly compare outcomes for online vs in-person students and programs.
- c) As new program modalities come online, evaluation methods and metrics will continue to evolve and processes should be grounded in current pedagogical research. The move towards increased online program delivery provides an opportunity to reconsider and update assessment procedures for all learning modalities.
- d) Some aspects of program quality and student experience are beyond the scope of individual departments and must be handled at the university level to achieve adequate comparisons of outcomes for students in different modalities.
- e) All program assessments inherently depend on robust data collection and the ability to subgroup findings based on course/program modality and student residency status. While individual divisions will differ in the specifics of their review and data collection processes, having a common set of principles will enable the UC to look broadly at outcomes across the system.

**(4) Wraparound Services and Experiences:**

- a) UC endeavors to foster a safe and healthy living environment for each student, with academic resources, campus facilities, health and wellness support, and other wrap-around services.
- b) All students should have equal access to these supports, regardless of modality. For online programs, this will require additional infrastructure and coordination with outside entities, given students' dispersed locations.
- c) While these services are largely beyond the scope of individual programs, the University as a whole must track access to and utilization of these services and make sure they are comparable across modalities.

**(5) Equity and Accessibility:**

- a) Students must have equitable access to instructional and academic support, regardless of modality. These include interactions with faculty and teaching assistants (Tas), tutoring and writing programs, services such as Centers for Accessible Education and Teaching and Learning Centers, technology infrastructure, etc.

- b) Some issues related to equity and accessibility will be modality specific. For example, online courses have higher technological demands and adequate space in which to participate in classes, but students have varying access to these resources. Similarly, students enrolled in on-campus programs with health challenges or complex personal situations may face greater barriers to full participation.
- c) Program evaluations must therefore consider metrics of access and participation across modalities.

**(6) Student Engagement/Building a Learning Community:**

- a) UC students benefit from interactions with a diverse and exceptional group of peers, teaching assistants and faculty. It is critical to ensure that all students, regardless of program modality, have access to the same breadth of contact. This may pose challenges if different types of students self-select into different modalities.
- b) Programs must create opportunities to foster interactions, both inside and outside of the classroom. This includes creation of meeting spaces (whether in-person or virtual), program events to build community, research experiences, and similar activities. Differences in modality can create special challenges here (e.g. spontaneous/unplanned interactions are less likely to occur online; in-person contact is different from virtual; students in online programs may require extra resources to participate in research or in-person activities; conversely virtual meetings have greater flexibility which can increase access).
- c) The UC educational experience goes well beyond the individual class or program, providing context for social interactions, community engagement, and a wealth of enrichment activities. While beyond the scope of an individual program evaluation, the University as a whole must continually evaluate whether students in different modalities are receiving comparable access to such opportunities.

**(7) Exposure to the Research Process:**

- a) One of the hallmarks of a UC education is the opportunity to interact with the research enterprise broadly and to work with faculty doing cutting edge research individually, through coursework, capstone projects, and student research experiences.
- b) Program assessment should evaluate access to and use of these opportunities and ensure that they are equitable across modalities.
- c) For online programs, where students do not have access to the physical campus research labs, equipment, libraries, and other facilities, this may require detailing alternative resources and/or approaches and comparing the resulting outcomes.

**(8) Admission, Retention, Persistence and Success Metrics:**

- a) In addition to immediate measures of program component quality, data on long-term metrics such as admission and retention rates,

persistence in the degree program, and post-graduation outcomes should be tracked, both overall and for appropriate subgroups of students.

b) Differences between the populations of students who apply for online vs in-person courses should be monitored, along with the implications for overall success metrics.

**(9) Alignment Across and Differences between Modalities:**

a) Pedagogical considerations should drive decisions about program modality. Modality specific advantages and challenges should be clearly laid out when programs are proposed or reviewed.

b) The same high standards for both instructional quality and student performance apply, regardless of modality, even though there may be differences in how they are achieved or evaluated.

c) Where the same program is offered both in-person and online, program objectives and metrics of evaluation should be aligned and success rates compared. Where the program is offered in a single modality, appropriate benchmarks from other comparable programs should be referenced.

**(10) Sustainability, Scalability and Resource Allocation:**

a) Although specific infrastructure and pedagogical needs may differ, students participating in online and on-person programs should overall receive comparable resources, both at the department and the university level. Online programs should not inherently be considered “cheaper” because of the scaling potential provided by the difference in physical plant requirements, but rather the focus should be on equitable student outcomes.

b) Similarly, faculty teaching online and in-person courses should receive comparable levels of course-development, staff/TA, and technological support, although the exact distribution may vary. Initially, extra development support will likely be needed for online programs.

c) All programs, regardless of modality, should be evaluated for viability and cost-effectiveness.

d) Both programs and the University as a whole should track resource allocation, student to teacher/TA ratios, technological support, and other key metrics by modality.