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Chair of the Assembly of the Academic Senate
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October 31, 2016

AIMÉE DORR
PROVOST AND EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Re: UCEP Report on Reexamination of Alternative Credit – Credit by Examination

Dear Aimée:

As part of the Senate's response to the programmatic initiatives in the budget agreement with Governor Brown (the "Budget Framework Initiative" or BFI), the Senate asked the University Committee on Educational Policy (UCEP) to review alternative means of earning credit that may help reduce time to degree for students. As part of this effort, UCEP reviewed the use of the Credit by Examination option ([Senate Regulation 620](#)), which provides a way for students to earn credit for a course based on their performance on an exam.

Although UCEP does not support the expansion of Credit by Examination over concerns that an exam is only rarely an appropriate substitute for the educational experience gained in a full course, there are circumstances where its use is appropriate. The Committee identified several inconsistencies in the way the option is applied across UC campuses, and is recommending a number of best practices to help eliminate those inconsistencies.

At its October 26 meeting, the Academic Council discussed UCEP's recommendations and approved their distribution to you and to campuses in fulfillment of this specific element of the BFI. I have also asked Senate division chairs to review the recommendations, and I understand that UCEP members will be working with their campus colleagues to consider their implementation on the campuses.

As you know, the Senate abandoned consideration of CLEP exams due to the restrictions placed on their review, by the College Board. UCEP's report on Credit by Examination represents the second step in responding to the request that the Senate review means of earning alternate credit. We anticipate receiving UCEP's analysis of campus policies concerning Advanced Placement credits later this fall.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Jim Chalfant, Chair
Academic Council

Encl: UCEP Report on Reexamination of Alternative Credit- Credit By Examination

Cc: Academic Council
Senate Director Baxter
Senate Executive Directors



UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY (UCEP)
Barbara Knowlton, Chair
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October 13, 2016

RE: Report on Reexamination of Alternative Credit- Credit By Examination

Dear Jim,

I'm pleased to submit the following report from UCEP on the subject of Credit by Examination.

Background on Process

UCEP began discussing the reexamination of alternative credit at the October, 2015 meeting, at which the Budget Framework Initiatives were first introduced to the committee. As an action item after the meeting, the representatives were asked to gather information from home campuses about current policies. This information was collected for the November 2015 meeting and a discussion of the similarities and differences between campuses ensued. Following this meeting, members were asked to consult with their local campus CEPs and other relevant administrators to get a sense of how frequently the credit by examination process is used and what barriers that may exist to students using this option. Information about campus policies was put into a memo that was available to the committee for the May 2016 UCEP meeting. The issue was further discussed at this meeting, including reasons why the credit-by-examination option is used so infrequently, workload issues for faculty and whether it would serve students best interests to promote this option more.

Following these discussions, an email was sent to the current and incoming members of UCEP listing specific policy inconsistencies by campus. This email included an outline of the report that would be submitted to the Academic Council. Each member was asked to opine on whether we should remove these inconsistencies and come up with a general policy. Members were asked if they felt any of the restrictions on credit by examination should be removed, or justify why not, and to give an opinion on whether students should be encouraged to take this option. Members were encouraged to put a discussion of credit by examination on the agenda for the first meeting of the local CEPs in Fall, 2016. These discussions over the summer set the stage for the committee to come to consensus on recommendations for the draft of the final report which was submitted to the committee at the October 2016 meeting and was approved pending additional suggestions.

Consistencies Across Campuses in Credit By Examination Policies

Each campus currently has a mechanism for credit by examination. These require approval at multiple levels (e.g. instructor, chair, dean). These are only intended for students in good standing and not to repeat a course. Students who are heritage speakers cannot use it for foreign language classes. Credit by examination is not widely used.

Inconsistencies Across Campuses

A major inconsistency is whether students can receive a letter grade for a course taken by examination or Pass/No Pass. Campuses that restrict to P/NP (Berkeley, Merced) justify this policy because the grade on a single final exam is not often a precise measure of performance, and thus it may be difficult to accurately assign a letter grade compared to performance accumulated across many weeks in the classroom. However, passing a final exam could still indicate competence in a subject. Across other campuses, students will receive the letter grade for the course based on their grade on the final exam.

A second inconsistency is whether there are restrictions in the number of courses for which students can receive credit by exam. For example, at UCLA, students must have 12 units of credit before being able to receive credit by examination, and then can only receive credit for one class per quarter by examination and only a total of 10% of all classes. Some campuses do not have any explicit restrictions on the number of classes that can be taken by examination. The rationale for limiting the number stems from the belief that the experiences gained in the classroom are critical part of the value of a UC degree, and students should be required to take a majority of their courses in the traditional manner. However, because credit by examination is so rarely used, this restriction has little practical value.

Two campuses, UCLA and UCSC, allow instructors to add additional requirements for students to receive credit by examination, such as a paper. This gives faculty the discretion to make the credit by examination process more similar to the evaluation of students taking the course.

In addition, there are a few campus-specific inconsistencies: UCLA requires students to have a 3.5 GPA to receive credit by examination. There does not seem to be much justification for this high bar, so long as a student is in good standing. UCI states that a student can opt to take a course by examination, and then reject credit and the grade after receiving it. UC Davis does not give students the option of receiving GE course credit by examination, as their GE program has a substantial writing and methodological component and is not solely content-based.

Opinions on Credit-By-Examination

The general opinion of UCEP and members of campus CEPs that provided input is that it would not be beneficial if credit-by examination became more widespread. First, as students may not be able to effectively judge their knowledge level in a subject as assessed by a particular exam, they may end up receiving a lower (or non-passing) grade than they would have if they had taken the course, which would then become part of their transcript. This appears to be the reason why credit by examination is rarely used- students understand the riskiness of taking a high-stakes exam without having the classroom experience giving them some indication of their knowledge level. Also, students passing a foundational course through examination only may be at a significant disadvantage moving on to other courses, as it seems clear that performance on an exam may only reflect partial knowledge of what would be gained through a classroom experience. This was also the main objection from faculty--that much of the value of taking a course occurs in classroom discussion, demonstrations, projects, attending office hours, etc., and would not be gained by students

passing courses through examination. In other words, the value of a UC degree is not merely the indication of competence in a field, but in the ability to intellectually engage with the world. Another concern of faculty is that widespread use of credit by examination would increase workload, which would draw resources away from classroom teaching. A student requesting credit by examination would require a unique exam that would need to be a valid assessment of the course material.

Recommendations

- 1) UCEP recommends that campuses adopt a common policy of awarding either P/NP or a grade using credit by examination. Individual faculty members who are willing to provide an option of credit-by-examination would decide whether they would be willing to provide a grade or only P/NP. This change would open the option of credit-by-examination to courses that need to be taken for a grade.
- 2) UCEP recommends limiting the number of credits students can earn by examination to roughly ten percent of units taken for a degree (18 under a quarter system). This limitation acknowledges the value of classroom experiences in a UC degree. However, because credit by examination is rarely used, this change will not have major implications.
- 3) We recommend that restrictions on the units that must be earned before attempting credit by examination be removed, as there does not seem to be strong justification. Also, so long as a student is in good standing, there does not seem to be justification for a higher GPA for a student to attempt credit by examination.

Conclusion

Credit by examination is unlikely to become much more popular with students as it involves risk and depends on students having a very good understanding of their level of proficiency in a particular subject. There is widespread agreement that the classroom experience is important for student learning and thus encouraging more students to attempt credit by examination will lead to them missing out on these important experiences. For many courses, assessment is not based on a single test score, and thus credit by examination is not appropriate. Nevertheless, there continue to be some circumstances in which students may wish to take this option and counselors should be made aware of it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Barbara Knowlton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Barbara Knowlton, Chair
UCEP