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June 8, 2022

MICHAEL T. BROWN
PROVOST AND EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Re: Next Steps for Senate Review of Online Degrees

Dear Michael:

The Office of the Campus Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor of UC Santa Cruz
recently sent you and UCEP Chair Mary Lynch the campus's proposal for a Creative
Technologies Bachelor of Arts degree.

The proposal presents the Creative Technologies degree program as one that does not simply put
a traditional degree program into an online format, but rather uses the online modality to create a
new type of learning and knowledge. Creative Technologies is specifically described as a
transfer program consisting of two years of online classes. But it is also open to UCSC students
admitted as freshmen. Transfer students can enter directly to the program from a community
college; freshman admits would attend UCSC in person for their first two years and then move
online to Creative Technologies for their final two years. Creative Technologies looks to be an
innovative proposal, and we recognize that it has the full support of the UCSC administration
and the relevant campus Academic Senate committees.

As you are aware, the Academic Senate has been studying the appropriateness and feasibility of
fully online undergraduate degrees for several years, but has not yet arrived at a final judgment.
Senate leadership wants the Academic Council to come to a consensus this year. UCEP has
provided the Council with explanation and guidance, but the determination of the
appropriateness of fully online undergraduate degrees lies with the Council. And until Council
has reached a decision, I have directed UCEP not to review or approve specific online degree
program proposals, including the Creative Technologies program or the UCI Business School's
online degree program (which has been operating for the past two years in a troubling gray area
without formal Council approval).

Senate leadership recognizes the thoughtfulness that has gone into the UCSC Creative
Technologies proposal. We would like to bring this proposal and the UCI Business School
proposal to the Academic Council as examples to help support our discussion of fully online

undergraduate degrees. I would like your permission to do so and will also ask permission from the appropriate parties at UCSC and UCI.

Let me give you a sense of Council's discussions thus far. It has taken a few interrelated turns.

• We have endeavored to make a distinction between online courses, online minors, online majors, and online degrees. Online courses and even minors are unproblematic; but we are seeking a clearer understanding of online majors and online degrees, the distinctions between them, and their implications for undergraduate education at UC.

Fully online undergraduate degrees such as those contemplated by UCSC and UCI would allow transfer students to attend a UC campus in a fully online modality (presumably expanding access to the University in an inventive way). However, there is a fundamental problem with this scenario. Any major entails students taking lots of upper-division courses. Most upper-division courses are in the major and thus under the department's or program's control. But to satisfy major and degree requirements at UC, a student must also take electives in other departments. Our concern is that there is no *pedagogical* justification for the major department to direct or restrict students to take only online elective courses offered by another department – rather, in this instance, there is only an administrative justification driven by instructional modality. That administrative justification would keep transfer students from being physically on campus and taking in-person electives, which include a much wider variety of courses to complement study in the major field.

This circumstance underscores a critical distinction between an online major and an online degree. A department or program could create an online major by offering all of its own courses in the major online. What it should not do is offer an online degree, because that would permit the program to restrict students to certain courses solely based on the modality of instruction. (It also bears mentioning in this context that UCOP still has not conducted a proper evaluation of UC Online-funded courses.)

• The problem above is in some ways a technical one, if fundamental. But it points to a larger issue. Transfer students have enrolled at the UC historically as mandated by the Master Plan for Higher Education. The UC has expanded its obligations in the transfer domain by meeting the 2:1 enrollment targets as reaffirmed by the 2017 MOU between CCC and UC. We have always striven to *integrate* transfer students into the life of the campuses, the departments, the majors. Indeed, campuses are urged by Regents, Legislators, and students themselves to establish organizations to better integrate transfers. Online degree programs pitched to transfer students would encourage their segregation, not integration into campus life. While online degree programs would potentially increase access, they may result in a lower quality degree—that is, with a lower likelihood of being educationally transformative – a primary reason students and their families want a UC degree in the first place. And given the experiences of other universities that offer fully online undergraduate degree programs, it may not result in acceptable levels of degree completion.

To that end, it is vital for the University to consider services that would be available to support these transfer students. Services for undergraduates on campus are provided on multiple fronts: through departmental Student Affairs Officers (SAO), through student undergraduate research experiences housed in units linked to undergraduate provosts and deans, through academic advancement programs within Student Affairs, through the Dean of Students offices, etc. One of

the online degree programs referenced above attempts to mitigate the loss of these resources for online degree students by moving all of this advising in-house. The other adds, akin to a self-supporting master's program, a Student Affairs Officer and career advisor but is mute on other matters. Whether these approaches would be effective is indeterminable, but they potentially reduce the richness of advising services, both in location and type, available to students.

• Over the last couple of years the Senate has relaxed Senate Regulation 610, the academic residency requirement. This move was a well-intentioned, student-focused policy decision. It dealt with the problem of students taking legitimate UC courses in other venues, such as UCEAP or UCDC. Academic residency came to be defined as the campus that approves the courses. A student need not be physically in residence on a campus to receive course credit and meet the residency requirement. Covid and remote instruction have further complicated this situation. These efforts to solve other issues have now created a loophole through which a student could conceivably earn a UC degree without ever setting foot on their campus.

The Senate is discussing options for closing the loophole and restoring the original intent of SR 610. (Students taking courses in UCEAP, UCDC, or UC Sacramento could petition to fulfill the residency requirement.) Discussion at Council has focused on the clear advantages of physical presence on campus, including not only the benefits of in-person instruction but also the ineffable, but harder to quantify benefits of physical presence in a thriving intellectual community. In that community, students interact in living spaces, labs, libraries, performance halls, and classrooms with fellow students, faculty, lecturers, researchers, GSIs, staff, and others. Here, the Senate takes very seriously the data on student disengagement and learning loss that accompanied the pandemic and remote/online instruction.

Should the Academic Council restore the original intent of the residency requirement, leadership would send the recommendation out for full Senate review in the fall. We anticipate a decision by the beginning of 2023. In the interim, UCSC and UCI could offer their proposals to UCEP as online majors, but not as online degrees.

Sincerely,

Robert Horwitz, Chair
Academic Council

Cc: Chief of Staff Peterson
        Academic Council
        Executive Director Baxter
Encl.