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July 14, 2023

KATHERINE S. NEWMAN
PROVOST AND EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

ACADEMIC SENATE DIVISION CHAIRS

Re: Principles for Online Undergraduate Programs and Majors, and Standard Terminology Guide for Distance Education

Dear Colleagues:

At its June 28 meeting, the Academic Council endorsed the attached set of principles for online programs and majors developed by the University Committee on Educational Policy (UCEP). The recommendations highlight the need for online programs to offer a rigorous learning experience and to meet the same quality standards as in-person programs. The document consists of two sections. The first section presents overarching principles for online majors and programs, focusing on student engagement, learning assessment, equity, quality, and academic integrity. The second provides specific recommendations to campuses for planning and evaluating proposals for online majors.

Council also endorsed the attached glossary of standard terminology related to distance education courses developed jointly by UCEP and the Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs (CCGA). The guide provides clear and standardized definitions, drawing from accrediting agencies and federal guidelines, to bring a shared understanding of these terms. It does not aim to replace existing campus terms and definitions; however, we know that inconsistencies in definitions of terms across campuses has, at times, led to confusion.

The Council agrees that the principles and glossary offer guidance that can help faculty ensure quality in online education. As noted, the Senate does not intend to impose either the principles or the definitions on the divisions or preclude them from using alternatives for their own policies and decisions. UCEP intends to update these documents regularly to adapt to new technologies and circumstances.

Provost Newman, we ask your help in transmitting the principles and glossary to the vice provosts and deans of undergraduate education at the campuses. Division chairs, we also invite you to forward the documents to Senate committees and other interested faculty for the purpose of discussion.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan Cochran". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Susan" and last name "Cochran" clearly distinguishable.

Susan Cochran, Chair
Academic Council

Cc: Academic Council
Chief of Staff Beechem
Senate Division Executive Directors
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UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY (UCEP)
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June 21, 2023

**SUSAN COCHRAN, CHAIR
ACADEMIC COUNCIL**

RE: PRINCIPLES FOR ONLINE MAJORS AND PROGRAMS

Dear Susan,

The University Committee on Educational Policy (UCEP) is pleased to submit a set of principles for online majors and programs the committee believes are essential to provide a rigorous education in an environment that benefits from new online technologies. The principles were developed and discussed by UCEP over the course of the 2022-2023 academic year and are informed by the 2020 Online Undergraduate Degree Program Task Force report as well as UCEP's 2022 White Paper on Online Undergraduate Degree Programs.

UCEP asks that Academic Council endorse the principles for online majors and programs and disseminate these materials to the Senate divisions and the Office of the President for transmission to vice provosts and deans of undergraduate education at the campuses. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melanie Cocco".

Melanie Cocco, Chair
UCEP

UCEP Recommendations for Online Undergraduate Majors and Programs

During the 2022/23 academic year, members of UCEP discussed and developed a set of values essential to provide a rigorous education in an environment that benefits from new online technologies. Ongoing budget cuts and the development of billion-dollar industries devoted to helping students cheat [1] present significant challenges to all modes of education. Although the concepts described here are provided in the context of newly developing online majors, **it is important to note that these principles apply equally to in-person degree programs that use online tools.** As courses increasingly become blended with assignments and exams administered electronically and hybrid degree programs develop to include online courses, faculty and administrators should be proactive in adapting new technologies in ways that ensure rigor, engagement, and academic integrity.

A. PRINCIPLES FOR ONLINE MAJORS AND PROGRAMS

Engagement. The coursework to fulfill the major requirements and the interactions of students with their peers and faculty are some of the most important and defining educational experiences for a bachelor's degree candidate. Students in online majors must engage with their peers and faculty in ways that are comparable to what exists in traditional majors. The 2020 Online Undergraduate Degree Program (OUDP) task force report [2] and a subsequent study by UCEP in 2022 [3] highlighted that the engagement of students with research-active faculty is a critical component of UC instruction and degrees, and this must play a central role in the design and implementation of online majors. The UCEP study also noted that **small class size** correlates with better outcomes. Small classes offer the benefit of increased opportunities for student/faculty interaction compared to large classes. The most successful online degree programs maintain a class size of fewer than 50 students per faculty member (see US Dept of Education College Scorecard [4] and USNews rankings [5]). It is also important to note that if the interaction between instructors and students is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student, then such a program would not meet the requirements of a distance education program as outlined by the Accreditation Agency WSCUC Substantive Change Manual [6], based on Federal Regulations [7].

Online assessment. Assessment is key to maintaining the quality of instruction. Assessing student learning online in a robust manner is a subject of great debate. Coursework should allow students to demonstrate mastery of concepts, not simply their ability to copy from the internet. It is possible for online assessments (e.g., proctored online exams) to be carried out with limited occurrences of academic dishonesty but the measures required are expensive and often risk violating student privacy (e.g, third party software, surveillance and room inspections ruled unconstitutional [8]). In addition, not all students have the same physical space, privacy, or equipment, which makes synchronous, proctored online assessment an inherently inequitable method. Meeting these challenges may require new modes of assessment that could minimize cheating (in-person exam rooms, use of test question banks to prevent student teams from sharing answers, shorter and more

frequent quizzes, open book exams, open-ended papers; etc). It will require more resources and a concerted effort at each campus and perhaps even systemwide.

Equity. Studies of online degree programs have shown mixed results [9]. Although some studies have shown improvements in time to degree with the addition of online courses to in-person degree programs, degree completion rates for fully online programs and learning outcomes of online courses remain a concern. The Public Policy Institute of California studied one million online courses [10]. They found a significant performance gap: “*younger students, African Americans, Latinos, males, students with lower levels of academic skill, and part-time students are all likely to perform markedly worse in online courses than in traditional ones.... The gap is largest for Latino and African American students (15.9 and 17.9 percentage points, respectively).*” Students from under-resourced backgrounds may have their own set of challenges with online education, which should be taken into account when designing an online major. It is important for online major programs to ensure that all their students can engage online (good laptops, peripherals, and internet connectivity). An additional concern is the potential creation of two classes of students: one in-person (privileged) group and one online (second-class) group who might be working toward the same degree. Finally, online courses should allow for face-to-face interactions within a diverse population of students; this is important in challenging biases that students might have when entering the university.

Quality. Students in online programs should have the same quality of instruction, advising, engagement with peers and program faculty, and support services as others in traditional majors. Beyond providing the same opportunities, online programs should be designed to ensure that the outcomes in terms of educational goals, research goals, and career placement for their students are equivalent to those in closely related in-person programs. Online programs should not be seen as something inferior by students, faculty, and the outside community. For this purpose, the design and implementation of the online programs must prioritize and emphasize the high quality of education and multi-varied experiences (peer interactions, learning communities, research, interactions with faculty, etc) that will be available to their students.

Based on the issues centered around engagement, assessment, quality and equity, we advocate the following principles for the design of online majors and other online programs.

1. All instruction must provide a **high level of rigor and academic integrity** in meeting learning goals, examinations, assessments, and program outcomes. The learning goals for the courses and the expected program outcomes should inform the online format for the program. Admission requirements to graduate programs should also be considered in designing the curriculum (for example, a recent survey found that 41% of Medical Schools would not accept an undergraduate online course toward their required courses [11]).
2. Programs offering online instruction should ensure that students have the same level of **engagement with instructors**, including research-active faculty, as in other closely related in-person programs.
3. Online instruction should be designed so that students will have similar levels of involvement in scholarship and **research with faculty members** in the program and complete projects of similar quality as students in other closely related in-person programs.

4. Online instruction should be designed to ensure that **students interact with each other** to the same extent as students in similar in-person programs to build a sense of belonging (for example, through peer mentoring and study groups). Students should be able to participate in student societies that exist on campus and have the same opportunities to **live on campus**, if they choose to do so. The ability to live on campus is particularly important to enable the undergraduate research needed for admission to many graduate programs.
5. Students in online programs should have similar access to trained counselors as other students in in-person programs within the same school or college. Programs should have a comprehensive and equitable plan for **student advising** and remediation.
6. Students in an online program should be eligible for the same level of **financial aid** as in-person students. They should be able to get timely career advice and have access to job fairs conducted on campus.
7. Programs should ensure that their students have **equitable access to tools** to connect and learn in an online environment. They should provide administrative support to students at the same level as they do for in-person programs. They should plan to provide support to instructors regarding technology issues related to teaching and learning online.
8. **Graduation rates** of students in online programs are expected to be equivalent to similar in-person programs, and students in an online program should be able to transfer to other majors or add minors in the same way as they would have if they were in an in-person major.
9. Programs should plan for **systematic collection of data** to assess the program outcomes of the online programs, addressing all the principles above. **Peer review** of online courses is highly recommended in addition to student evaluations.
10. **Admissions requirements** to online programs should not be lower than admissions requirements to in-person programs. Online students should be UC quality students ready to handle demanding UC quality instruction.

B. EVALUATING PROPOSALS FOR NEW DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Both the Accreditation Commission (WSCUC) and Federal Regulations maintain requirements that are specific to Online courses (defined as 50% or more instruction online). For this reason, it is recommended that UC Divisions track their online course offerings including the engagement activities in those courses.

Accreditation of the University to educate students in California is performed by the Western Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC; formerly WASC). They define an online course as one where 50% or more of instruction/interaction is online [6]. Online courses must “support **regular and substantive interaction** between the students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously.” UC courses that include 50% or more of instruction/interaction online should be designated as online courses for the purpose of WSCUC accreditation review. Degree programs have a similar threshold of 50% [6]: “*Institutions must obtain (WSCUC) substantive change approval for programs in which 50% or more of the (degree) program (units for completion of the program) will be offered through distance education.*” For UC students who started as freshmen, the “program” refers to their UC degree. In the case of a

transfer student, the “program” consists only of the courses taken at UC to complete a degree (online courses taken prior to transfer are not considered in the 50% calculation).

Federal financial aid rules require at least two engagement activities for online instruction [7]. If requested, an institution should be able to provide a list of courses with online instruction and their engagement activities.

Correspondence courses are defined as having online instruction but do not have sufficient engagement activities. For example, a course that posted recorded videos without an engagement activity specific to that content could be called a Correspondence Course. *Federal financial aid* cannot be given to students who take more than 50% of their units (credits) as Correspondence Course format [12].

Program Review/Audit: WSCUC accreditation review occurs every 10 years. However, once a campus starts to offer degree programs online, it is the campus responsibility to submit a “Substantive Change Proposal” to WSCUC – regardless of the time since the last accreditation review. Federal Financial Aid audits occur every year.

UC faculty value student engagement in learning. Approved programs should be models of excellence in online education that aim to create a positive reputation, so that if someone learns that a student completed an online program at UC, they do not suspect that the student received an inferior education.

When planning an online major, the following recommendations (based on the principles described previously) should be discussed in consideration of a distance education degree proposal.

1. The need for the online format should be motivated in the proposal by the course-level learning goals and the expected program outcomes. Proposals that simply transfer courses online with minimal modifications should not be approved.
2. The prevalence of academic dishonesty in online testing is a well-known issue and resolving it frequently runs into student privacy and technical issues exacerbated by economic inequalities. Proposals should demonstrate that they are able to measure student learning in a robust and equitable manner while respecting student privacy.
3. Proposals should contain examples of online courses that are expected to be part of the required online program for which there is evidence that the online format leads to learning outcomes for students that are as good as the in-person format.
4. Proposals should have plans to ensure that students have levels of engagement (including one-on-one interactions, advising, and oversight) with instructors (including research-active faculty) that are much the same as those in otherwise similar in-person programs, bearing in mind that online students might lack the informal in-person interactions that in-person students often receive. Instructor-to-student ratios should be low to ensure the delivery of the high-level of education expected from a UC program.
5. Engagement with students should be faculty initiated and include activities that are more than just pre-recorded lectures. Examples of engagement activities can be found on page

11 of the WSCUC Substantive Change Manual [6] and defined under Federal Regulation 600.2 (see “Academic Engagement” and “Distance Education” sections 4-5 [7]).

6. Proposals should demonstrate that program faculty will devote as much time to mentoring students doing research projects as is typical in otherwise similar in-person programs.
7. Facilitating high levels of interactions among students inside and outside of the online classroom will require significant support from faculty and staff, and it may require different modes of interaction online. Proposals should demonstrate that their program can be successful in this goal.
8. Proposals should have a plan for how the faculty members involved in the program will be trained to deliver and assess high quality education and to engage with students online. Programs are strongly encouraged to collaborate with an instructional design team to design their programs and include the report created by this design team in the proposal.
9. Proposals should demonstrate that students in the online program will not be disadvantaged if they decide to change majors, compared to students changing from in-person majors.
10. Proposals should demonstrate that the technological requirements will not exacerbate existing inequities in the educational system.

References

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STANDARD TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO DISTANCE COURSES
Created by representatives from UCEP and CCGA, May 3rd, 2023.

The following terms will be used by systemwide committees. This set of systemwide definitions does not preclude individual campuses from employing alternative terminology for their own policies and decisions.

DEFINITIONS

Distance education: a mode of instruction in which some or all students are physically separated from the instructor. Includes online and hybrid courses. Federal regulations and [WSCUC/WASC](#) require courses in distance education programs to offer faculty-initiated regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors.

Substantive interaction: Faculty must engage students in at least two of the following:

- (i) Providing direct instruction;
- (ii) Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;
- (iii) Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;
- (iv) Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; and
- (v) Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

(From WSCUC/WASC [substantive change manual](#).)

Courses can be classified according to the mode of instruction:

- **In-person course:** Has an assigned physical classroom. Primary instruction contact hours (primary course activity, i.e., lecture) take place in person. May include occasional online contact hours (primary course activity, i.e., lecture), whether synchronous or asynchronous.
- **Online course:** Does not have an assigned physical classroom. All primary instruction contact hours (primary course activity, i.e., lecture) take place online. Format may be synchronous, asynchronous, or both.
- **Hybrid course:** Has an assigned physical classroom. Primary instruction consists of both in-person contact hours and intentional and regular online contact hours, whether synchronous or asynchronous.

- **Mixed enrollment course:** Requires a physical classroom for some but not all students. Some students receive instruction in person; others, online.

A **hybrid course**, for approval and accreditation purposes, can be further classified based on instructional contact hours.

The definition of **instructional contact hours** is:

Time spent in lecture, seminar, lab, discussion section, etc., with the instructor of record. Instructional contact hours are equivalent to the number of hours per week for which a room would be scheduled for an in-person version of this course. Does not include office hours, final examinations, or interactions with teaching assistants (see WASC).

A hybrid course is classified according to the fraction of primary instructional contact time that occurs in person:

- **Hybrid in-person courses** are hybrid courses in which 50% or more of instructional contact hours are designed to be in-person.
- **Hybrid online courses** are hybrid courses in which less than 50% of instructional contact hours are designed to be in-person.

Distance education courses are those in which less than 50% of instructional contact hours are designed to be in-person for some or all students. This category encompasses online and hybrid online – these two subcategories are treated similarly in accreditation and approval processes.

Programs may be classified as an **in-person program**, **online program**, or **hybrid program** according to the mix of course types. WASC considers online programs and some hybrid programs to be distance education.

- **Multiple-modality programs** are programs with specific course offerings that may be in different modalities, such as online, hybrid, or in-person. Such programs should not be described as “hybrid,” but rather as “multiple-modality.”
- **Joint degree programs** involve more than one department or school. Such programs should not be described as “hybrid.”
- **Dual-degree programs** involve more than one degree, e.g., MD/PhD. Such programs should not be described as “hybrid.”

Teaching format is defined as how course material is presented:

- **In person** is content delivered in-person in real time.
- **Synchronous** is online content delivered remotely in real time.
- **Asynchronous** is online content available online and not delivered in real time (e.g., prerecorded).

POLICY NOTES

Courses that allow some students to enroll with the expectation of online instruction and some with the expectation of in-person instruction (sometimes termed “hy-flex”) count as **online** or **online hybrid** as long as the online students will receive less than 50% of instruction in-person.

Online courses may still require students be provided a physical space to attend any synchronous classes. This need has been especially noted with online courses taken by undergraduate students who live on campus and lack a suitable workspace where they live and/or by students who take both online and other courses that fall on the same day, requiring them to be on campus for the in-person course(s).

We recommend the following **terms no longer be used**:

- **Hybrid enrollment**: Has been used to refer to courses where some students participate in contact hours exclusively online (and register accordingly) and some students participate in person (and register accordingly). The same content is delivered to students whether they participate online or in person. However, due to the use of “hybrid” to describe teaching modalities, it is recommended to use “mixed enrollment” instead.
- **Remote course**: Can be used to describe a method of participating or working in a course, but not to describe a course.

These definitions will likely evolve over the next few years.