May 16, 2011

Daniel Simmons
Chair, Academic Council
University of California

Re: UCLA Response on the Revised UC Online Education Pilot Project Plan

Dear Dan,

Thank you for the opportunity to review and opine on the Revised UC Online Education Pilot Project Plan (dated March 24, 2011). Upon receipt of the revised plan and your request, I specifically requested review by the UCLA Senate’s Council on Planning and Budget (CPB), Undergraduate Council (UgC), and Graduate Council (GC). In addition, I sought comments from the UCLA Faculty Committee on Educational Technology (FCET), the joint Senate-Administration Information Technology Planning Board (ITPB), and from all five UCLA faculty members whose courses have been selected to participate in the UC Online Pilot program. All other Senate committees, including all Faculty Executive Committees, were welcome to opine. Despite the highly compressed timeframe for evaluation (slightly over one week), most agencies were able to respond in a thoughtful, substantive manner, although to date we have not heard from any of the five UCLA faculty who are part of the pilot. The Executive Board, which speaks for the UCLA Division on such matters, reviewed the responses we received (see attached), and forwards the following position on the Revised Online Pilot Project Plan:

The UCLA Senate is on record as being highly supportive of the use of online educational tools and methods, both for enhancement of the learning experience for UC’s undergraduate and graduate students, and for improved access for populations of students who are underserved by the University of California, including working adults. Indeed, to date UCLA has launched a number of successful online education programs at the graduate and certificate levels, including a completely online M.S. Degree in Engineering. In addition, a few existing UCLA undergraduate courses have been offered online during summer sessions, and these have provided valuable
information and experience for the campus as we explore this alternative learning modality. It is with this experience base that our campus has evaluated this revised UC Online Education Pilot Program.

Despite our Senate’s strong support for improved access for underserved California populations and for many of the benefits of online education, this revised Pilot Program plan (with only $748K in external funding from the Gates and Hewlett foundations and approximately $7M in loans from the UC STIP) has generated considerable concern. The program as revised is called “under analyzed and under-justified”. As written, this plan is opposed by virtually every UCLA body that responded to our request for comments. These criticisms are not meant to reflect on the hard work by faculty whose courses were selected for development for this online pilot project. Rather, the criticisms reflect the significantly altered nature of this pilot project and its now questionable financial feasibility. Specific concerns are outlined below.

1. Concerns are expressed on the altered direction of the pilot program, with a significant emphasis now on making lower division UC online courses available to community college-level or even advanced high school students, rather than alleviating overcrowding in existing UC courses. There is considerably greater financial risk in this emphasis on targeting non-UC students in order to be able to pay back the loan. The market for such lower division courses is actually rather full, with many online for-profit courses, online AP courses, and remote education programs offered by a number of community colleges. The UC would be coming quite late to this particular market, and it’s not clear why students would choose these UC online courses over the competition if their UC entry is not guaranteed. The courses that distinguish the UC from competitors, i.e., upper division and graduate courses, appear to be almost completely absent from this reformulated program.

2. Additional concerns are expressed regarding the apparent requirement from the Gates Foundation to have the course materials be “open source”. The original UCOE proposal stated that “Access to the instructor or the credit bearing course that the content contributes to will naturally only be available to enrolled and registered students”. This appears to be a complete violation of the reported constraints by the limited external funding that has been acquired for the pilot. Origination, refreshment, and royalty fees are outlined in the new proposal, but ownership of intellectual property is unclear, especially given that fees are said to go to academic units and/or their faculty. In light of the open source constraints, intellectual property issues are highly problematic. On this basis, our CPB calls the revised pilot program “simply a waste of our time, effort, and money” if the open source constraint is implemented.

3. Concerns are expressed that a market research phase of this pilot is planned for the summer of 2011, yet the courses have already been effectively commissioned and faculty
are planning to work on their development (with promised summer support). Market research needs to be done before moving forward with course development, especially for courses that compete with existing online programs.

4. Our FCET notes that, as with prior versions of the online pilot proposal, this proposal “studiously ignores” the fact that online courses are currently being offered for undergraduate credit in the UC system and that online learning technologies already pervade most of our high enrollment courses. This online pilot project appears to have become an “expensive experiment to teach us what we already know and have experience with” regarding online education. In addition, the pilot program’s insistence on an “idiosyncratic IT platform”, which may or may not be compatible with UC campuses’ current course management systems, is vigorously opposed.

5. The business plan as outlined in the proposal is highly inadequate. Now that the bulk of the funding takes the form of a loan, it raises questions on how such borrowed funds could alternatively be used to meet the underlying goals of the online pilot program. A quick analysis by UCLA’s FCET shows that, assuming that the $7M in borrowed funding is adequate for 40 online courses, the cost of $175K for one online course would provide funds for a rented classroom adjacent to UCLA for three years, accommodating 30 in-person courses per year with 60 students in each course. It is not clear that a single online course offered for 3 years could come to within an order of magnitude of these 30 courses in terms of access or benefits for current UC students. Moreover, our experience in online education shows that it takes quite a few years for even a small program such as the engineering M.S. degree to make a profit.

6. Given the very large fixed costs that will be required before any students enroll in these online courses, it’s doubtful that the UC would be able to stop the program at any point, even early in its initiation, and recover more than a tiny fraction of its investment. Personnel costs of the order of $1M per year are also of concern, based on the foregoing discussion.

7. The Senate finds the mitigation of risk discussion in the document to be highly ironic. The comments of our SOAA FEC capture the opinion best: “It is difficult not to wonder whether the very limited time frame we have been given to review a plan that describes the “slow pace” of Academic Senate approval of programs and courses as a “risk” factor is not itself symptomatic of its perspective on shared governance. One of the plan’s strongest arguments for the UC entering the field of online education is the numbers of California residents who are already participating in programs offered by for-profit universities. Reclaiming this increasingly for-profit and notoriously fraud-ridden field for public education would indeed be a great service to the people of California. It is disturbing, therefore, when the plan links potential certification for students who
complete online programs with recruitment and marketing, while seeming to describe the safeguards of academic standards as a risk to its financial model.”

The UCLA Senate recognizes that this altered version of the UC Online Education pilot program may well be a “train that has already left the station”. Yet the detailed concerns outlined above are such that we strongly recommend NOT moving forward with the project as currently constructed. We recognize that there are UC faculty, including at least five at UCLA, who in good faith submitted proposals for the development of the online courses and who are counting on summer support during 2011 for the time they plan to spend in this development. But moving headlong into a program without first doing a market analysis and addressing the financial feasibility questions outlined above is irresponsible, especially in the current budgetary climate.

We therefore strongly recommend that an objective, transparent market survey by an outside agency be commissioned immediately. Funds that were promised for faculty summer salaries during 2011 may need to be spent to fulfill obligations, but additional funding for infrastructure, software, etc., should be delayed until completion of the market survey and a rigorous justification provided that shows this is an appropriate use of these scarce funds. If such a justification cannot be made to the UC Senate, then the pilot should be abandoned or substantially altered to make it logical and feasible for our university system.

It may well be possible for the UC to develop a world-class online education program which makes use of its academic richness and which improves access to the UC. But the present revised project plan is so fraught with problems that much more careful analysis is needed before implementation of the pilot program even begins to takes place.

Sincerely,

Ann Karagozian
Chair, UCLA Academic Senate

Cc: Martha Kendall Winnacker, Executive Director, Academic Senate
Jaime R. Balboa, Chief Administrative Officer, UCLA Academic Senate
May 4, 2011

To: The Academic Senate, University of California Los Angeles, Professor Ann Karagozian, Chair

From: UCLA Faculty Committee on Educational Technology (FCET), Professor John Mamer, Chair

RE: Project Plan for UC Online Education (draft of March 24, 2011).

The members the FCET have read the Project Plan, UC Online Education what follows is our appraisal of the Project Plan.

Overview and Summary

We have been asked to opine on a document entitled Project Plan, UC Online Education. This document appears to be a revision of the draft prospectus of the UC Online Instruction Pilot Project. The espoused goal the pilot was to craft a plan to use online education to alleviate crowding in over subscribed undergraduate courses. The goal is a laudable one: to use online learning to make critical undergraduate courses more widely available and thus to improve four year graduation rates.

Comments

1. The current version of the proposal seems to focus not on alleviating crowding in lower division courses, but instead on selling junior college courses to non-UC students. Our lower division curriculum is indeed of very high quality; however, it is specialized to preparing our students for our upper division curriculum. There is no indication, absent a promise of UC matriculation, that UC has a competitive advantage in the provision of junior college courses (either online or offline). The proposal even goes as far as to suggest that we might someday offer a degree or certificate for those students taking the on line curriculum but not gaining admission to UC. (much like the AA degree awarded by community colleges). Opinions in our committee differ on whether or not this is something that UC should do. However, we agree that pursuing large-scale online lower division education will take significant resources and is a matter that should be deliberated widely before funding is committed.

2. The Project Plan and accompanying documents suggest that $7M will be required for the project. As of now, $750,000 has been raised. It is suggested that UC should commit $6.25M (or $7M it is not clear) on the basis that sales in a secondary market (non-UC undergraduates) will generate enough revenue to repay the seed funding. However, no market study has been done to assess the size of the market, the price elasticity of demand, and the
proportion of the market that we might capture.

3. The documents available to us do not have sufficient information for us to assess whether the structure being established will support quality online courses with student learning outcomes comparable to on-campus students. Key questions have not been answered.

   a. How many students will be in an online section?
   b. How many TAs will be assigned to help run each course section?
   c. How will TAs scale with number of students?
   d. We need to see the cost analysis that breaks down the fixed costs of the program (cost of all of the managers, staff, infrastructure, etc.), the revenue per non-UC student, the incremental cost per external student, and the number of students that will be in each online section.

   If the cost model is to take existing sections and, through technology, add a few hundred paying students without providing additional support, it will not work.

4. As was true in previous drafts of this proposal, the fact that online courses are currently being offered for undergraduate credit in the UC system and that online learning technologies pervade the delivery of most of our high enrollment courses is studiously ignored. Instead, the view of the authors seems to be that it is necessary to mount an expensive “experiment” to determine if online courses can be an effective tool for furthering our educational mission. The answer to this question is generally known to be “yes”. What we need is local experience with the tools at hand to determine what works on each campus and in each department and course.

5. How would the need to design courses that can serve both UC and an external market affect the balance between hybrid online courses (part in person and part online) and pure online courses? In the short run, hybrid online technologies may be the most effective route to relieving enrollment pressure.

6. The proposal insists on an idiosyncratic IT platform. If the results of the project are to be useful to the campuses, then the end product must be compatible with each campus’ course management systems. As currently set forth, campuses will have to re-engineer anything that the pilot produces.

7. The Project Plan document offers an inadequate business plan. The plan says that 20 courses will be developed in 2011/12 and another 20 in 2012/13. Will this effort exhaust the $7M funding? Will the funding be sufficient to fund the creation of courses in perpetuity? Assuming that the $7M is sufficient for 40 courses yields a cost of $175,000. It is then suggested that
revenues from selling these courses to non-UC students will pay back the loan. Nowhere does the plan exhibit the enrollments and revenues associated with UC’s extant online courses. Does our experience to date warrant the assumption of the marketability of our courses?

8. No assessment is made of the opportunity cost of the funds that UC will invest. If UC is to internally fund the development of online courses, the relevant issue is not whether or not the money could be paid back at some future time. The key issue is whether or not the project is this the best use of the funds. If it is determined that there is no more important use for the funds than to ease lower division enrollment bottlenecks, then it is our responsibility to find the least expensive way to accomplish the task. There is nothing in the proposal that suggests that there has been a systematic study of the causes and remedies of our undergraduate enrollment problems. Nor have any other alternatives for increasing the availability of impacted courses been put forward. Let’s put the cost numbers in perspective. The average class size at UCLA is 53 students. Office space in Westwood rents for about $30 per square foot leasing one classroom that can accommodate 60 students for one year would cost $54,000 dollars. The cost of developing one online class (at $175,000) would pay for the space for more than three years (roughly equal to the useful life of an online course). A single 60-seat room could handle ten two-day per week courses per quarter, or (under the quarter system) 30 classes per year. If the primary cause of excess demand for selected undergraduate courses is physical space, leasing additional space seems a cheaper alternative, yielding greater flexibility, local control, and smaller overhead expense. We have no indication from the proposal that any sort of cost tradeoff calculations have been done.

9. The financial risk mitigation suggested in the proposal is not credible. It is reasonable to expect that most of the seed funding will be spent or committed before the first class is offered. Setting up an online learning platform and creating online courses involves very large fixed costs that will be incurred before any student is enrolled. Looking at the Organization and Management section of the Project Plan, we see that 2.6 FTE of “executive leadership” and 2.9 FTE of “educational technology and instructional design” personnel have been already been identified. Including benefits, the cost is likely nearly $1M per year. Even if the decision is made to stop the experiment at the earliest milestone, it is unlikely that UC would see more than a tiny fraction of its investment returned. The figure stated in the project plan (at least $3.5M returned) is not believable. Make no mistake about it, UC is funding the startup and will likely see no return of its funds.
May 5, 2011

To: The Academic Senate, University of California Los Angeles, Professor Ann Karagozian, Chair

From: UCLA Information Technology Policy Board (ITPB)
Professor Kathleen Komar, Chair; Professor Jerry Kang, Vice Chair

RE: Project Plan for UC Online Education (draft of March 24, 2011).

The ITPB discussed the proposed plan for UC online education at its May 4 meeting. John Mamer, Chair of the FCET, is a member of our board and also made the report of his committee available.

The ITPB is unanimously and strongly opposed to the proposed plan. We would like to make clear at the outset that we are not opposed to online education as such. Many fine courses and uses of online education are taking place on our campus and other UC campuses (and could be studied systemwide). We realize that online education will be an important part of the future of higher education. We also remain supportive of the UC Online Instruction Pilot program with respect to its intent and plans for improving access for UC students, supporting UC students' programs and providing a wider spectrum of pedagogical opportunity and approach as part of our quality education programs. What we are opposing is the specific, proposed plan as it is written.

We oppose the plan on several counts. First, the shift from no-cost to the university to 7 million dollars in loans changes the project framework dramatically and makes the project untenable. While we could conceivably support a UC investment in instruction online to sustain quality and extend access to UC educational programs, we would want to see a carefully studied and well laid out plan. We would choose neither to take out such large loans nor to be burdened with repaying them under current budget constraints.

This funding shift and the resulting loans raise other questions. If our goal is to alleviate overcrowded classrooms and improve access to impacted courses, we would certainly examine other strategies before investing such a large amount of money in online experimentation.

We are also troubled by the idea that UC should begin selling its courses in order to repay such loans. There is no evidence that a market of sufficient magnitude would exist; moreover, we question whether such activity would contribute to the mandate of the University of California.
Our committee was in strong agreement with the additional concerns raised in the FCET report.

Given these essential questions, we strongly oppose the proposal as written. We were also distressed to be asked for our evaluation of the radically revised report so late in the game. Not surprisingly, some committee members voiced skepticism about whether our input was genuinely being sought. Assuming that our comments will indeed be taken seriously, we voice strong opposition to the current proposal as under-analyzed and under-justified. While experimentation and data-gathering are valuable, this does not appear to be a well-conceived plan for improving our position in relation to online education.
May 4, 2011

Ann Karagozian, Chair
Academic Senate

RE: Online Education Project

Dear Ann,

CPB does not meet before May 5 and we have had time for only a very limited email discussion of the Online Education Project "proposal." Based on a very limited review, and focusing our attention on budgetary matters:

1. We are very concerned that what was announced as a project to be funded entirely with outside grants is now being supported largely with UC funds, apparently through some form of internal borrowing, the details of which are not provided;

2. We are concerned that the goal(s) of the trial remain unclear, and seem to have changed more than once. Is the goal to provide quality lower education to UC students more efficiently? To make money in the commercial education market? To serve "underserved" populations? These are three very different sorts of enterprise, which do not seem to be complementary. We understand that the modest contribution from the Gates Foundation requires that courses all be free and open access, which is simply a waste of our time, effort and money.

3. After reading the proposal's content (such that it has any; most is pure fluff), we can understand why outside funders were not interested. The proposal that was shopped around outlines course development at the lower divisional/advanced high school level, a market that is already very full and in fact over-crowded. UC comes at least five years late to this.

4. Most seriously: we genuinely doubt that there is much market or interest in what is being developed. UC's comparative advantage in education is at the masters and doctoral level. There is no real money in the latter...though it must remain at the pinnacle of UC activities...but we already have a broad and growing panoply of MA/MS level courses that are wholly or partially web-based. We note that these have emerged from individual campuses and, indeed, from individual and small groups of faculty members. This is how curriculum is actually built, including curriculum designed to make money.

5. We understand that a market research phase is now planned for this summer. A bit late, since courses have already been commissioned. Given CPB's recent experience evaluating another piece of market research, we insist that it needs to be commissioned and paid for in such a way that it does not become just another piece of "client-centered" research. Or, more bluntly, all care must be taken to insure that it does not just provide the results that the UCOP
sponsors of this project want; it really needs to be independent. We are not confident that this will happen.

6. Department chairs and deans rely heavily on summer school revenues from UC and non UC students and they will NOT want these online pilot courses to compete.

Best,

[Signature]

David Lopez
Chair, Council on Planning & Budget
May 4, 2011

Ann Karagozian, Chair
Academic Senate

RE:  Online Education Project

Dear Ann,

Thank you for the opportunity to opine on this topic. However, as the Online Education Project is focused on undergraduate education and as the Graduate Council has been extraordinarily busy with other issues, I offer this individual response on behalf of the Council.

While this is indeed an undergraduate project, to make a larger shift into the world of online education could at some point affect graduate students in terms of their roles and duties as Teaching Assistants. Moreover, these kinds of projects could eventually reduce their numbers, hence negatively affecting graduate training (and possibly graduate support). Such ripple effects have not been considered in this report.

The report must also strive to be realistic in terms of the expenses and resources online education will require. Online education is extraordinarily labor intensive and expensive. Where is the money for this initiative really going to come from? The report needs to be crystal clear on this front. What will faculty time and resources devoted to these projects take away from existing brick and mortar classes?

Concerning revenues, as UCLA’s Online MS in Engineering has shown, it may take years before these courses turn a profit (if they ever do). Along similar lines, I am quite concerned that UCOP, or campus units such as Summer Programs or University Extensions, will tax the living daylights out of any revenues these courses may generate. Such things have already happened with summer instruction as well as other programs. In other programs, these outfits have begun with very attractive agreements only to become more and more demanding in terms of the share of revenue they keep. Such issues would make the prospect of online education far less attractive.

Perhaps most importantly, what will UC online education courses accomplish that is different from offerings at the community colleges (or for-profit institutions)? It is ill-advised to compete on this terrain with our sister institutions, which are ahead of UC in terms of online education, and, which might well offer similar courses at a fraction of what a UC course will cost. For-profit institutions are also ahead of UC. Other than our brand, it’s critical to have a clear mission on the use and purposes of online education and how a UC version of it is unique and better in terms of educational quality.
Thank you again for the opportunity to opine on this issue.

Sincerely,

Steven Nelson
Chair, Graduate Council

cc: Jaime Balboa, CAO, Academic Senate
    Kyle Cunningham, Graduate Council Analyst, Academic Senate
    Dorothy Ayer, Executive Assistant, Academic Senate
May 10, 2011

To: Professor Ann Karagozian, Chair
    UCLA Academic Senate

From: Professor Joseph B. Watson, Chair
    UCLA Undergraduate Council

In Re: Undergraduate Council Response to the Project Plan on the UC Online Education Program

On behalf of the Undergraduate Council, I would like to extend the Council’s appreciation for seeking our input and thank you for the opportunity to review and opine on the UC Online Education Project Plan dated March 24, 2011. The Council discussed the plan at its May 6, 2011 meeting and strongly opposed the plan due to the serious concerns raised during the discussion. After considering extensively the implications of the plan, most of which the plan fails to address, and potentially adverse effects on UCLA’s standards of excellence the plan might cause, the Council voted 12 in favor of opposing the plan, with 0 opposed and 2 abstentions.

Bluntly put, members were appalled at the level of unpreparedness the plan exhibits. Given the information therein or lack thereof, it is evident that the plan was developed without sufficient preparatory scrutiny. The lack of details in all essential areas of planning and implementation glaringly points to a failure to deliberate fundamental questions about the nature and extent of the proposed online education plan. Members were distressed that if granted and implemented, the plan would prove to be a money-losing proposition, serving little purpose to campus while draining already dismal resources. Among the most notable concerns are:

- It is left unclear who the target audience is, which in turn raises a number of questions the plan fails to answer. Who are those non-matriculated students and why will they want to take online courses at UCLA? Has any market research been carried out to confirm there is indeed a market? Why target lower division undergraduate courses when providing online training at the graduate level seems to be more suited to UC’s unique capabilities?

- Members questioned how the plan defines an online course. The plan implies significant faculty and TA involvement, comparable to or more than what is required in the traditional in-class instruction. Given shrinking faculty and TA resources which are already affecting the traditional in-class instruction on campus, how will the resources be obtained and how viable will they be in the long term? Online courses may be less resource-intensive in terms of physical space requirement. In all other areas, however, they may well require far more resources or be much less revenue-generating than the plan alludes to.
Relatedly, members inquired about the plan’s motivation and objectives. Members were deeply concerned that finances appear to be the driving force, adding that the plan even fails to satisfactorily address this, arguably, sole motivation.

Members found the lack of proper faculty oversight at all levels disturbing. How will the effectiveness of the project be measured? Who will evaluate the instruction? Normal channels of faculty oversight are fundamentally missing in the document.

Lastly, there should have been a constructive and consultative process to assess immediate needs of each campus concerning online education. When each campus is striving to prioritize its needs in order to face squarely budgetary turns and twists, the fact that the plan suggests to take a huge loan to teach courses that may serve little or no urgent needs on campus is vexing.

Members clarified that they endorse online education, recognizing the innovative and creative improvements it may bring. However, they cannot endorse the proposed plan, knowing that it may tarnish UCLA’s pursuit of excellence.

The discussion of the proposed plan was a lengthy one that raised important questions about UCLA’s standards and expectations. The Council remains interested in following how the online education project will evolve and looks forward to an invitation to review future drafts. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (x57587; jwatson@mednet.ucla.edu) or Academic Senate Principal Policy Analyst Jisoo Kim (x51194; jkim@senate.ucla.edu). Again, thank you for considering the opinions and concerns included in this letter.

cc: Dorothy Ayer, Executive Assistant to the Senate Leadership, Academic Senate
    Jaime Balboa, Chief Administrative Officer, Academic Senate
    Jisoo Kim, Principal Policy Analyst, Academic Senate
MEMO

Date:   May 6, 2011

From:   Andrea Fraser
        Chair, Faculty Executive Committee
        School of the Arts and Architecture

To:     UCLA Academic Senate
        Jaime Balboa, CAO

Re:     Project Plan: UC Online Education (UCOE)

The FEC of the School of the Arts and Architecture discussed the President’s Project Plan for UC Online as requested by the Chair of the Academic Senate. At our Friday, May 5 meeting, we voted that we cannot endorse the plan.

Letters from the UCEP Chair and the Academic Council Chair dated April and May 2010, which we received with the plan, are very clear: UCEP and the Academic Council’s endorsement of a pilot online learning project of 25 courses “is contingent on the procurement of external funds.” It is therefore puzzling to receive a plan, a year later, which not only reveals that little more than 10% of the external funding needed for the project has been raised, but that this pilot project has almost doubled in size to 40 courses. It is mystifying how a plan that was only able to secure 10% of the support it sought would, over the course of the same year, be expanded. We are presented with an accelerated time-line for implementation, but are not provided with the Appendix A, which reportedly “sets out a conservative financial forecast which projects profitability by 2014/2015.” And we are only given 6 days to review the plan. Under these circumstances, frankly, it is difficult to take the plan seriously. Were the original projections of external support overly optimistic or was the plan simply not solid enough to secure the support that might have been available? Without being able to review the financial forecast, there is no reassurance that the projections of profitability are not also overly optimistic. The rush only adds to a general impression of questionable planning.

It is difficult not to wonder whether the very limited time frame we have been given to review a plan that describes the “slow pace” academic senate approval of programs and courses as a “risk” factor is not itself symptomatic of its perspective on shared governance. One of the plan’s strongest arguments for the UC entering the field of online education is the numbers of California residents who are already participating in programs offered by for-profit universities. Reclaiming this increasingly for-profit and notoriously fraud-ridden field for public education would indeed be a great service to the people of California. It is disturbing, therefore, when the plan links potential certification for students who complete online programs with recruitment and marketing, while seeming to describe the safeguards of academic standards as a risk to its financial model.
I asked Professor Peter Lunenfeld, one of our members with significant expertise in the area of on-line education, to draft a more detailed response to the plan on behalf of the SOAA FEC, which can be found below.

To: Prof. Andrea Fraser  
Chair, SoAA FEC

From: Prof. Peter Lunenfeld  
DMA Representative to the SoAA FEC

Re: UCOP Project Plan for UC Online (UCOE) dated March 24th, 2011

Date: May 5, 2011

At the request of SoAA FEC Chair Prof. Andrea Fraser, I have created a response to the Office of the President’s Project Plan for UC Online (UCOE) dated March 24th, 2011. Our FEC was given a very limited time frame to craft this response, and with that caveat offered, here is a quick response.

1. This proposal fits a pattern the SoAA has already commented upon: that the UCOP and the UC as a whole are moving in haphazard and reactive ways, throwing out a huge number of new initiatives and policy revisions without offering a holistic vision of where we might be going as a university, as individual campuses, as units within those campuses, and as individual faculty. We understand fully that we are in a variety of crises – economic, political, and structural – but that does not mean that we cannot demand better overall vision planning, so that we have metrics to evaluate a proposal like this.

2. This Project Plan for UC Online begins with the awkward fact on the ground that it was supposed to have been supported by $7 million in outside funding, but at this point it has raised just over 10% of that. Given this enormous shortfall, it difficult to take their projections for profitability by 2015 at face value. To get there, we are asked to support the borrowing of the over $6 million. Borrowing now to invest in future success can be a good idea, but if the UC defines “success” in online education as net profits after expenses, they may not ever hit their metric.

3. Net profitability in this plan depends on non-UC students enrolling. But at the same time there is a push here for UCOE to handle the overflow of unfunded, qualified students applying to the UC and CSU systems. The proposal does not outline a convincing plan for creating online pedagogical structures, methodologies and outcomes equal to its bricks-and-mortar models and somehow turn a profit within four years.

4. The proposal has lofty aims – creating a learning environment that dynamically generates information able to guide teaching, learning and the continuous improvement of online instruction – but remains murky about just how involved ladder rank faculty will be in this endeavor. Origination, “refreshment,” and royalty fees are outlined, but
ownership of intellectual property under the plan is unclear in the plan, which has these fees going to academic units and/or their faculty. Nor is there a discussion of safeguards to protect grad students and adjuncts from the inevitable pressures they will be put under to coordinate, grade and manage these courses.

5. The proposal states that the project is organized to ensure widespread participation and buy-in by including key stakeholders in planning, advisory, and development roles. But this proposal, like a number of others our FEC has received in the past three years, feels like a railroading. Rightly or wrongly, our FEC feels that the economic crisis is being used as the excuse to rush this through, even given the fact that the outside funding promised to support this has not materialized.

6. Disciplinary independence and self-governance define the UC, where quality education has been built up with the vetting and evaluating of methodologies over generations of academic trial and error. Under the plan, pedagogical, critical and social relevance of instruction will be driven by Ed School criteria: Evaluation will determine whether, how, and at what cost online instruction is or is not effective in delivering a UC-quality undergraduate education.

7. While the proposal describes pursuing different markets, it does not acknowledge that there are very different kinds of audiences for on-line offerings from UC Riverside versus UCLA, UC Santa Cruz as opposed to UC Berkeley. The proposal offers a model to create an overall “UC online” brand at the very moment that the flagships in our state system are at least contemplating going more independent. In theory this UC-wide strategy might be a good thing, but it’s hard to evaluate without a broader vision of the future of the UC system and UCLA’s place within that system.

8. The SoAA FEC remains committed to online education now and in the future. But we are skeptical about its potential as a profit source for the university as a whole. Using online education to strengthen UC both within its campuses and in terms of local, national, and global outreach is the direction in which we should be moving, and there are elements of the UCOP proposal for UCOE that are consistent with this vision. However, we remain concerned about its profit-orientation and overly rosy projections about everything from potential student bodies, to revenues, to academic rigor.