May 11, 2011

Dear SCFA Colleagues,

Online Education!! Is this something viable? Will it save UC's finances? Will it make education more accessible and affordable? The promoters promised it all. Looks as though it is even more of a flop than skeptics anticipated. Please find in this second May newsletter an op-ed by Professor Wendy Brown of UCB and a very strong letter from the Academic Council expressing their doubts and disappointment about the enterprise. We have also included an article by Bob Samuels which links the online education issue with privacy and lecture ownership.

We should express ourselves individually in the strongest terms to our Senate and Administrative leadership. We can also write a letter on behalf of the SCFA if there is a groundswell of opinion about it. You should certainly discuss it with your colleagues and write to the heads of relevant Senate Committees.

Cordially,

Shelly Errington,
on behalf of the SCFA Executive Board

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Why is UC Borrowing 7 Million to Fund the On-Line Education Pilot Project?

by Wendy Brown, Heller Professor of Political Science and Co-Chair, Berkeley Faculty Association

Last year, Berkeley Law School Dean Chris Edley provided numerous assurances that the project to explore the feasibility of an on-line undergraduate curriculum would be funded wholly from extra-mural sources. He was as confident that he could raise money for the pilot as he was that a fully developed on-line curriculum would itself be a money-maker. Indeed, Edley insisted that on-line ed would soon be a net benefit for UC in many ways. It would, he said, generate surplus revenue for the discretionary use of the bricks and mortar campuses, extend the benefits of a UC education to all who sought it (especially those unable to access the campuses in coming years

due to physical capacity limits), and provide the high quality education UC currently offers. He summed up the project of an on-line UC curriculum as simultaneously providing "social justice," educational excellence and a revenue boon for UC.

It was too good to be true. We knew it then and explained why. On-line education in the "quality sector" had already met with bankruptcy at Columbia, University of Illinois and elsewhere. No studies established that on-line education could match that provided on campuses. Problems with on-line courses are legion. Moreover, existing on-line programs are worse exploiters of debt-financing by students than bricks-and-mortar campuses.

Now there is a new twist to the story. The UC Senate approved the pilot provided that it was funded, as Edley promised, entirely from extra mural funds. But fundraising has fallen far short of hopes-Edley has managed to obtain only a single $750,000 grant from the Gates Foundation. This is substantially less than the $7 million plus that the pilot is expected to cost. Why the shortfall?

Because private foundations concerned with on-line education seek to understand its problems and want to fund studies of those. Why the persistently high and seemly intractable attrition rates? What happens to students who go deep into debt for on-line education and don't finish the courses or obtain a degree? How to address high cheating rates? What elements of classroom courses cannot be replicated on-line (oral skills, many critical thinking skills, group problem solving, spontaneous integration of course material and current events) and what is the significance of these losses? And how can expensive, high quality courses compete with Open Source on the one hand and for profit colleges on the other?

In other words, Edley's dream of a money-making cyber campus came at the wrong time, after other experiments with on-line education in the quality sector had failed and so many problems in on-line curricula have surfaced. At this point, Foundations rightly want to study the problems, rather than throw good money after bad for another high-priced experiment. That is why the UC pilot could not draw the private funding it sought.

But did this stop the pilot? No. Dean Edley is a powerful man in the University of California system, one who remains a special consultant to President Yudof and routinely rubs shoulders with other top brass at UCOP. So, instead of treating the failure to raise money for the pilot as "market information" that should have slowed, shrunk or quashed the project, it got a bail-out from UC, a $4-7 million dollar interest-free line of credit. This at a time when Operation Excellence is slashing essential staff positions, when tuition continues to skyrocket, when hiring freezes have hamstrung countless departments and other campus units, when UC is bracing for another round of devastating budget cuts from the state.

A loan for a pipedream-when existing departments can't even staff their existing curriculums, support existing graduate students or pay for printer paper-would be bad enough. But it is the collateral on this loan that is the icing on the cake.

The loan is "secured" by fees expected to be paid by non-UC students taking the pilot courses. In other words, students who are not UC students would be funding a pilot that offers courses that are not UC courses (the courses have not yet gone through Senate channels for approval). Since the students are not UC students, they will not be eligible for UC aid, which means they will

either be encouraged to borrow or they will be wealthy individuals, mostly likely from outside the United States, who can be duped into thinking that these are UC courses and that they are UC students when they take them. Who else would pay thousands of dollars to take a course stamped falsely with the UC brand name that could be more cheaply procured through any number of other sources?

This is a scandal of obscene proportions. Why is a project promised to be funded extra-murally now allowed to borrow up to $7 million from UC itself? Why is collateral that depends upon hoped-for exploitation of student indebtedness or consumer ignorance allowed to secure the loan? And what guarantees that state funds or student fees-the only fungible income streams UC has-will not be tapped if and when the original collateral plan collapses?

Not only is the on-line education pilot project being launched on a broken promise, it aims to use non-UC students both as cash cows and guinea pigs, perhaps falsely selling them the UC brand into the bargain. Who knows whether the scheme will work. What is certain is that the $7 million dollar loan and its collateral represents corruption in the present and captures in a nutshell how "students" would be regarded in the future cyber-campus the pilot anticipates.

Social justice indeed

May 6, 2011

PRESIDENT MARK G. YUDOF
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Re: Online education pilot program

Dear Mark:

Last year the Academic Council endorsed the UC online education pilot program with the understanding that only private funding was to be used to support the program. At the time it was suggested that as much as $30M could be raised from extramural sources to support this program. Since then, 29 letters of intent from UC faculty were selected out of 70 submissions for the planning phase of the online pilot courses. Despite the optimistic funding projections, however, only $748K in private funding from Next Generation Learning Challenges (funded by the Gates and Hewlett foundations) has been secured, and that funding requires that course material be open-source, available to others to freely use and adapt. The majority of funds for the online pilot courses are to come from a loan that UC will make to the program of up to $6.9M. The loan is intended to be repaid with fees from non-UC students taking the pilot online courses.The members of the Council have received multiple expressions of concern from faculty about the changes in both the funding and planning for the project compared with that originally was endorsed by the Council. I am instructed by the Council to communicate the scope of the concerns raised across the campuses.

The Council's concerns reflect neither on the work of our colleagues in crafting pilot course proposals, nor on our support for experimenting with online education to produce educational

flexibility and to improve access to UC-quality courses for prospective transfer students. Rather, the Council's questions are raised in relation to the pilot program as a whole, as outlined in the Project Plan: UC Online Education (March 24, 2011). There are questions on oversight and evaluation of the program, the dependence of the budget model on enrollments of non-UC students, the corresponding focus on lower division requirements and possible competition with the Community College mission, and the financial feasibility of paying back the loan. The program description, as well as any program protocols and communications regarding the program, must be clear that there is no guarantee of UC undergraduate admission upon completion of the online courses and that there is as of yet no mechanism for establishing eligibility for transfer on the basis of the courses in the program description. Additionally, there is no coherent curriculum design reflected in the courses, nor has a transfer curriculum been proposed as part of the program. The fundamental question of whether an on-line curriculum can or should provide the basis of a transfer curriculum separate from a course of study at an accredited institution has not been raised and remains to be addressed. The Council also questions how non-UC students' qualifications are to be determined and, given other equally attractive and perhaps more affordable online courses, whether the enrollments will be sufficient to be able to pay back the loan. In short, while the pilot project was intended to enhance access and to generate revenue, it is now unclear whether these goals may be meshed and met.

Council also notes that while the project description indicates that courses will be offered beginning July 2011, to our knowledge no course proposals have yet been submitted to Senate course committees for approval as part of the pilot project. We understand that at this point courses may not be sufficiently developed to move forward as part of the project. Yet the project description lists as a program "risk" the possibility that Senate courses committees will be slow to grant course approval. The Council wants to be clear that delays in implementation of the program beyond what is contemplated in the program description are not attributable to a lack of Senate action, but to the fact that the program proponents underestimated the time required to put courses into place. Senate evaluation should necessarily encompass both the intellectual content of the class materials and the modality of delivery.

Given these concerns, the Council advises that no additional online pilot courses be developed, beyond those currently selected and funded, until the following takes place:

(1) The evaluation procedure contemplated in the proposal must be conducted and then subjected to independent rigorous review in order to assess online courses that are taught in this pilot program. We fully appreciate that evaluation tools to assess the online program are a significant element of the project and, when developed, these tools might be useful to assess the quality of other courses within the UC system. The quality and desirability of the courses as a means of producing a high-quality online component to UC education should be assessed. The efficacy of the technological aspects of the course delivery (appropriate platform, testing mechanism, etc.), the business model beyond the pilot program (profitability), and the pros and cons of this educational direction for UC should be assessed.

(2) Any full proposal for expanding the online pilot program would be developed on the basis of the findings in (1), defining the proposed expansion, its aims and objectives, the scope and impact on the system, and the funding model.

On behalf of the Academic Council,

Daniel L. Simmons, Chair
Academic Council

Copy: Lawrence Pitts, Provost and EVP
Daniel Greenstein, Vice Provost
Robert Anderson, Academic Council Vice Chair
Academic Council
Martha Winnacker, Academic Senate Executive Director

The Online Witch Hunt--Bob Samuels

Submitted by administrator on Sun, 05/01/2011 - 12:56
in

- [UC-AFT Confronts UC's Push to Online Education](#)

One of the risks of moving classes online is that the faculty can become subject to surveillance and political intimidation. This threat has just become a reality at the university of Missouri where an instructor has lost his job after a video of his class appeared to show him advocating violence in labor activism.
http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/04/29/fallout_from_videos_of_labor_course_at_university_of_missouri

According to the Inside Higher Education story, the infamous Right-wing blogger, Andrew Breitbart, the same person who brought down ACORN and Shirley Sherrord, obtained the video from a student who copied it off of the university's online course management system. The video was then reedited, and although the university officials acknowledged this manipulation, they still fired the instructors. We see in this an example the failure of academic freedom to protect instructors and students, and we also learn how online

courses open faculty to public scrutiny and political witch hunts. In this particular case, students were motivated by a conservative group to post video of their teachers endorsing unions and other forms of labor activism. This example is similar to what happened at UCLA a few years ago when a conservative alumni group offered money for students who recorded their professors saying anti-American or anti-Israel things. Not only is Big Brother watching, but with the new digital media, little brother also has access to our private words and actions.

Online courses then not only get rid of the need for "bricks and mortar," but they also remove any sense of education as a protected sphere. Since anyone can now copy and edit digital recordings, online lectures and course material become subject to political manipulation. While the UC faculty will be assured that privacy protections will be be in place for online courses, these safeguards will be easily transgressed by any high-tech political hack.

In related news, UC Berkeley is contemplating putting student evaluations online, and this move will also render faculty vulnerable to outside political manipulation. As we have seen at UCLA, disgruntled students can try to sabotage their professors by claiming that these teachers are Left-wing ideologues, and once these evaluations go online, you cannot control whose hands they end up in. Online student evaluations also turn teaching into a market where students search for the easiest classes or the most entertaining lectures.

It should be clear that faculty and students should resist this move to place all of our views and experiences online.