



November 6, 2017

To: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair
Riverside Division

From: Ward Beyermann, Chair, Executive Committee
College of Natural and Agricultural Science

Re: Campus Review: Proposed Changes to Guidelines for Remote Learning Courses

The proposed changes to Guidelines for Remote Learning Courses was sent to the members of the CNAS Executive Committee for review on October 22, 2017. A couple members responded with approval and no additional comments. However, one individual is passionately critical of the document, and to accurately represent his concerns, his comments are included largely verbatim below.

Starting with the major concerns, the overall tone of the document appears to throw as many roadblocks as possible at "Remote Learning" courses. The document suggests imposing requirements for online courses that are not currently applied to in-person lecture courses, even though the underlying concerns are applicable to both (e.g. cheating, quality/quantity of interaction between students and faculty).

With respect to possible cheating, third parties that UCR and other UC campuses currently use (e.g., Examity, ProctorU) provide monitoring services that are quite advanced, even monitoring the eye movements of students. This level of monitoring is beyond what a single faculty member could do in a lecture hall. Therefore, the subsequent advice about using several smaller "lighter weight" exams does not follow. Also in principle, more frequent assessments to discourage cheating should apply to all courses, not just those with an online component.

The document is entirely free of any reference to academic studies regarding online courses. In fact, many studies show that online learning is at least as effective as face-to-face and often better. UCSC is currently studying subsequent performance of students in courses after taking either the online or in-person version of 3 different calculus courses. Preliminary analyses indicate no statistically significant differences in performance based on the delivery method. Two other examples are

<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-55052058/learning-in-an-online-format-versus-an-in-class-format>

<https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>

The document states that “COC will primarily focus on whether the RL course will provide the same quality of education.” Upon what do they base their expertise? Are we selecting COC members based in part on their familiarity with established best practices for digital immersion? Are we providing literature to ensure they are informed?

The document includes the phrase “Given the absence of generally accepted best practices...” This is not true. For example, QualityMatters appears to be the industry leader. Arizona State University also has developed a set of best practices that are used for its very large online operation. Senior administrators from UCR recently visited ASU to learn about such matters, and they should be consulted regarding best practices for RL courses. Several other institutions have also developed best practices for online instruction.

The document wants to mandate built-in mechanisms for assessing learning outcomes, yet we have not done that for traditional courses.

The document suggests "weekly, faculty-initiated, substantive interaction between student and instructor ... in addition to office hours." Doing that would substantially increase faculty workload because they would have to both prepare lectures and find other ways to interact with students. This passage suggests the authors do not view online lectures as "real" lectures. But again, no evidence is provided that online lectures are less effective than traditional ones.

This requirement seems to presume that faculty are making online courses to alleviate the amount of time they need to spend on a course. However, faculty will have already invested hundreds of hours to prepare their online experiences (e.g. videos), and typically in an online course, modification of the content, preparation of assessments (usually increased in an online course), and uploading of content will consume many more hours than a traditional offering of course. Adding a requirement for additional activities will deter many faculty from designing such courses as now it will guarantee that it will take more time than a traditional course.

Different disciplines and courses will benefit from different types of instructional modes. For example, the physical sciences benefit from problem-based learning in class, while this may not be as appropriate for a survey course on types of plants, for example. Similarly, an online discussion blog may not be useful at all in a general introductory course.

Students often do perceive the pre-recorded video presentation of an instructor as a personal experience because they are watching the video free from distraction. In a lecture environment, in fact, students may feel alienated and unengaged, particularly in a high-enrollment course where many students are prone to doing other activities in class.

Academic freedom should allow an instructor to offer a course as they see fit. If a course does not effectively convey the course content or engage the students, or if the instructor does not seem accessible to students, then comments to that effect will show up in the course evaluations, and it is up to a department chair to direct the faculty member to change their approach.

The proposed guidelines will have the effect of stifling creativity and innovation, and will dissuade faculty from trying to move into online teaching, which is clearly the direction being taken by many institutions, as a supplement to traditional methods of instruction. The systemwide ILTI grants aim to fund fully online courses, and these new restrictions will make it more difficult to propose these from UCR.

Finally, according to the document, “COC will not consider arguments about reducing time to graduation.” This statement runs counter to a major objective here at UCR and at the systemwide level. If offering RL courses can facilitate students getting into courses they need when they need them, then why wouldn’t this be considered? The approach advocated in this document would greatly hamper UC’s attempts via the ILTI program to increase offerings of courses that can be taken by cross-campus enrollment, to the benefit of all campuses.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ward Beyermann". The signature is fluid and includes a long, sweeping underline.

Ward Beyermann, Chair
CNAS Executive Committee