



November 6, 2018

To: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair
Riverside Division

From: Wee Liang Gan, Chair
Committee on Courses

Re: Provost's Taskforce for Hybrid and Online Education's Report

The Committee on Courses discussed the report from the Provost's Taskforce for Hybrid and Online Education in our meeting on October 23, 2018. The committee appreciates the taskforce's effort and recognizes the need to address the issues studied by the taskforce. However, the committee has the following concerns. One member did abstain from voting to support this list of concerns.

(1) The report seems to present a somewhat one-sided view to support an agenda of having substantially more online courses. For example, on page 1, the report mentions that "when instruction is delivered online using best practices, it is at least equally as effective as traditional face-to-face instruction". However, if one delves into their reference 4, one finds discussions of how students in online courses do not do as well as students in in-person courses. The committee recognizes that for some courses, online mode-of-instruction can be as good as or even better than in-person mode-of-instruction, but there are also legitimate concerns about the effectiveness of online teaching, which should not be ignored.

(2) The survey conducted by the task force elicited responses from 198 faculty of whom 158 are ladder faculty (page 2). The report states that 54% of the faculty respondents "strongly or somewhat agree that UCR should offer more online options to students in bottleneck or gateway courses where appropriate to do so" (page 3). There is reason to believe the respondents did not form a representative sample. Later, the report claims "most UCR faculty say they are interested in online education" (page 5), which thus goes beyond the available evidence.

The report would be more convincing if it presented the full results of the faculty survey. The committee believes that concerns as well as support from faculty who took the survey should be shared and taken seriously.

(3) The report did not directly explain how moving large gateway courses online will solve bottleneck issues (page 4). The committee appreciates that moving large classes online will solve some scheduling issues and relieve classroom space

constraints, but feels that many important details were not provided. Do we have data on the scale of the bottleneck issues? What kind of class sizes does the taskforce have in mind for online gateway courses? Will more Teaching Assistants be needed and be available? The committee also feels that there may be certain courses that are genuinely difficult to teach online, such as those including labs. If one of the purposes of moving large gateway courses online is to solve bottleneck problems, then these issues should be considered.

Additionally, research regarding which categories of students do best and which do worst in online contexts are of particular importance to UCR. Available evidence suggests that underprepared students, beginning students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to thrive in online courses. Is this evidence compatible with a push to put large introductory courses online first?

(4) The taskforce created a model group of universities consisting of UCI, OSU, ASU, PSU, and UCF, with the rationale that these universities are likely to have meaningful overlap with UCR "in terms of mission, values, and student demographics" (page 2). The committee had concerns about how representative this list of universities is, or whether it was picked to support an agenda of substantially increasing the number of online courses. Why didn't the taskforce study other UC campuses besides UCI, including those with better-developed online teaching programs, such as UCLA?

According to US News website ranking of U.S. universities, UCR is ranked 85, OSU 140, ASU 115, PSU 230-301, and UCF 165. Did the taskforce study higher ranked universities? A search on US News website shows that 4-year graduation rates are: UCR 53%, OSU 33%, ASU 45%, PSU 21%, and UCF 40%. UCR also appears to have better freshmen retention rate than these universities.

The committee is concerned that that OSU, ASU, PSU and UCF may not be the appropriate models for us to follow.

(5) The report states that "in the longer term, the taskforce believes that UCR should aim to deliver about 25% of courses online" (page 4). There is no explanation of how the taskforce came up with this percentage. Did the taskforce conduct any detailed study of our campus needs?

The committee recognizes that in the longer term, it is quite likely that there will be an increased presence of online teaching at most universities. However, the committee feels that instead of a randomly selected target percentage, our focus should be on bringing to the faculty's attention online pedagogical methods that might be suitable for their courses (traditional, hybrid, and online), and fostering an environment that promotes and facilitates the adoption of such methods where they improve access and teaching effectiveness.

The report states that "UCR should aim to put 50 courses online each year for the next five years, beyond new ILTI courses" (page 4). This does not seem realistic in view of (2) above and campus resources.

(6) The report presented a few of our students' views on online courses. It may be helpful to communicate the students' views to faculty more systematically. Several committee members have had lengthy discussions with their own students about online pedagogy, and learned a good deal from students' thoughtful and nuanced responses.

(7) The committee feels that the report deserves credit for bringing up core infrastructure, support, and sustainability issues, but that these should be central to future discussions. For example, many current online courses are highly dependent on the faculty members who designed them. How can we move towards clearer and more standard expectations about course design and online architecture that would allow courses to become more sustainable, without locking in features of the currently underdeveloped landscape of best practices?

How can we guide faculty who are designing classes that include online elements, and train students to be effective online learners, in a stable and consistent way?

Finally, are we looking at the wrong unit of analysis by concentrating on 'online courses'. Most courses on campus today already have some online elements, such as homework turned in over iLearn or class discussion boards. Some are more hybrid, with some contact hours (a problematic term) taking place via digital media, others face-to-face. Some are delivered primarily or entirely online (including examinations, discussions, and consultation). As online media, communications, and information tools continue to develop, does our campus need a strategy for supporting good teaching using all suitable technologies (from the chalkboard to the internet, and others only beginning to emerge), rather than focusing on 'online courses' as a distinct category?