

TO: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair  
Riverside Division

FR: Bruce Link, Interim Chair  
Executive Committee, School of Public Policy

RE: Report Review: Provost's Taskforce for Hybrid and Online Education Final Report

Date: November 27, 2018

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The members of the SPP Executive Committee found the Taskforce report clear in identifying issues, presenting facts, and addressing known concerns. We applaud the use of survey data from faculty and students but would like to know more about how the data were collected and how representative they can be claimed to be. We recommend that before any policies are implemented that a thorough presentation of the plans be presented to each unit. We recommend this because the circumstances within different units could vary substantially -- we would certainly like this for the School of Public Policy.

Addendum: January 17, 2019

The School of Public Policy would like to call the Senate's attention to the mixed record of research on online education. Blended or hybrid models often work well, but the record for fully online courses is mixed. Most of the research is flawed because it does not examine the same students in online and face-to-face classes. The few studies that make this apples-to-apples comparison find that online courses work well for motivated, mature, and diligent students, especially working professionals. However, lower-division students who have had weak secondary school educations, and especially males and minority students, do not appear to perform as well in online courses as they do in face-to-face courses. The best study so far is of community college students in the State of Washington. See Di Xu and Samantha Smith Jaggars, "Adaptability to Online Learning: Differences Across Types of Students and Academic Subject Areas" (2013).

The Xu and Jaggars abstract is as follows: Using a dataset containing nearly 500,000 courses taken by over 40,000 community and technical college students in Washington State, this study examines how well students adapt to the online environment in terms of their ability to persist and earn strong grades in online courses relative to their ability to do so in face-to-face courses. While all types of students in the study suffered decrements in performance in online courses, some struggled more than others to adapt: males, younger students, Black students, and students with lower grade point averages. In particular, students struggled in subject areas such as English and social science, which was due in part to negative peer effects in these online courses.

Xu and Jaggars recommend that students not be allowed to take online courses in their first year and that students who do not receive at least a B grade point average in their first year be prevented from taking online courses until their grades reach that level.

With sufficient scaffolding to aid self-directed learning, online courses can be successful for a wider range of students, but this scaffolding is costly to implement.

We do not think that UCR students are comparable to Washington State community college students, but the Xu and Jaggars study nevertheless provides a cautionary tale relevant to the administration's enthusiasm for online courses. These courses are not for everyone and should not be offered to students who are unlikely to succeed in them.

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*This letter is an electronic communication from UC Riverside, a campus of the UC system.*