


May 19, 2020

TO: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair
Academic Senate

FROM: Philip Brisk, Chair 
BCOE Executive Committee

RE: Proposal to Extend COVID-19 Remote Instruction at UCR

Dear Dylan,

On May 14th, the BCOE Executive Committee met to discuss the Administration's Proposal to Extend COVID-19 Remote Instruction at UCR. The discussion was lively and respectful, and all members present expressed gratitude toward the administration for their honest and heartfelt efforts to look out for the wellbeing of all campus constituents. The one clear outcome of the discussion was that the proposal that we reviewed was underdeveloped in many respects; just as examples, the roles of teaching assistants and staff vis-a-vis in-person or remote-option teaching were not clearly articulated.

International graduate students are of particular concern to BCOE. One particular concern for International MS students is to establish at least 12 months of residency during their studies, in order to qualify for OPT status, which will allow them to remain in the US following the completion of their degrees to pursue employment. The opportunity to establish residency and work in the U.S. is one recent why M.S. study is attractive. Thus, any proposal to offer remote-only or remote-option online instruction courses based on the assumption that International M.S. students will remain in their home countries will disincentivize them from enrolling in BCOE M.S. programs. For example, completing 6-months of a 15-month M.S. degree prior to entry to the U.S. will only provide International M.S. students with 9 months of residency, which is insufficient. While this does not speak directly to the debate over instruction teaching mode, there is a strong argument to be made in favor of prioritizing on-site instruction for graduate courses.

Several Committee members felt that campus should prioritize bringing graduate students back to campus for a number of reasons, possibly prioritizing this over opening up campus for instructions. Potential benefits could include support for research, support for undergraduate instruction (beyond the scope of working as Teaching Assistants for remote-option or in-person courses), etc. Additionally, it was noted that Teaching Assistant support for online courses and student learning is challenging, and that the current ratio of enrolled students to employed Teaching Assistants is too high; it was suggested that budgets for Teaching Assistants should be adjusted up to support remote instruction, which is considerably more difficult than on-site instruction at UCR.

As noted earlier, the Administration's proposal does not address the issue of Teaching Assistants and their well-being. While instructors are given the option to choose whether or not they want to teach in a physical classroom, it is unclear if Teaching Assistants will be provided with the same option. Just as an example, the course that I most regularly teach, CS/EE 120B, has 3 hours of lecture per week, taught by an instructor, and a 3 hours of laboratory section per week, taught by a Teaching Assistant. My assessment, which is certainly imperfect and is likely to be biased, is that the transition to online instruction degraded the quality of the laboratory section far more than it degraded the lecture. Given the power differential between myself as Faculty and a Teaching Assistant (who may or may not be an M.S. or Ph.D. student under my supervision vis-a-vis degree completion), I would not be comfortable even suggesting to teach a laboratory section in-person, despite the fact that doing so would arguably be in the best interest of the students enrolled in the class. Clarification on this issue is needed.

The undergraduate experience at UCR is incredibly important, and the BCOE Executive Committee cares greatly about the wellbeing of all UCR undergraduates. The BCOE Executive Committee discussed in some detail a survey conducted by Roderick Smith, Manager of BCOE Student Affairs; approximately 16% of BCOE undergraduates responded to the survey. From reading the comments, it was clear that many students value UCR facilities as a study space, possibly quite more than the faculty and administration realize. Many respondents noted that they do not have workspaces in their homes that are conducive to learning, and that they are often interrupted by family members and family responsibilities. For these students, the greatest benefit could be achieved by opening libraries for study. Another possibility might be opening up classrooms as study halls, rather than for in-person or remote-option instruction. One potential benefit of this strategy is that students' access to campus facilities would not depend on the preferences of individual faculty members for remote-only vs. remote-option instruction.

There was also some desire to know what other UCs are doing, and to make sure that, for both practical and marketing reasons, UCR's decision-making should not appear to be substantially more degraded. One Committee Member mentioned a rumor that UC San Diego may try to offer 50% of freshman courses on campus; this might be more attractive than the current proposal, in which nothing is guaranteed to any Freshman, and access to on campus instruction depends solely on the whims of faculty.

Another open question was whether or not daycare facilities would be open on campus. Remote-option teaching would not be a viable option for instructors with young children if no daycare is provided. This issue may generalize to instructors with children of any age, as it is presently unclear which local school districts will and will not be open next year.

As Chair of the BCOE Faculty, I encouraged Maggy Harake, the Student Representative on the Executive Committee, to speak to any and all issues that we may have missed. Maggy noted that many students are frustrated by the quality of online instruction; for Spring 2020, this is understandable, because faculty had little to no time to prepare for the transition. If instruction for Fall 2020 is to be online, the decision should be made soon so that faculty have adequate time to prepare for online instruction over the summer; Roderick Smith, who is support staff for the BCOE Executive Committee, echoed these concerns. Maggy noted that many students are frustrated that tuition has not been adjusted, despite the fact that instruction quality has been degraded.

Maggy suggested that precisely what is on the table for Fall quarter is completely unclear to students, and these uncertainties are impeding their ability to adequately plan for the 2020-2021 academic year; the BCOE Executive Committee agrees that this is a major challenge. One suggestion to improve online learning was to create a repository where instructors can post their online syllabi, which could help students plan for their courses. The Committee noted that while many instructors are diligent about posting their syllabi on iLearn as soon as the relevant course pages become available, only students who are proactively enrolled in the course will be able to access the syllabus.

Lastly, Maggy noted concern the the proposed policy did not provide any details about operational aspects of remote-option instruction. As an example, she noted that it was unclear if there would be enforcement of social distancing protocols. As an example, what happens if a student fails to properly cover himself or herself during an on-campus lecture. Will a staff member be present at all lectures to enforce protocol? It is unclear who is responsible and what will happen to other students who might be exposed in this situation. It is unclear what UCR can and cannot ensure about student health, safety, and wellbeing under COVID-19, from either an operational or a legal perspective. Even as a first step, it is unclear if campus intends to provide PPE, or if campus will be able to do so.

The BCOE Executive Committee did not attempt to reach a formal conclusion through this discussion process, and did not vote on whether to endorse or reject the Administration's proposal. The Committee hopes that this feedback helps bring to light many of the challenges that the UCR campus community faces in light of COVID-19, and appreciates the opportunity to speak on behalf of BCOE Faculty, Students, and Staff.

May 19, 2020

TO: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair
Academic Senate

FROM: Philip Brisk, Chair 
BCOE Executive Committee

RE: Proposal to Extend COVID-19 Remote Instruction at UCR

Dear Dylan,

Several staff members in BCOE Student Affairs provided feedback to the BCOE Executive Committee regarding the Administration's Proposal to Extend COVID-19 Remote Instruction at UCR. This feedback was obtained after the May 14th meeting of the Executive Committee. I shared the feedback and the contents of this memo with the BCOE Executive Committee, who approved my decision to transmit this memo to you.

BCOE Student Affairs supports the Administration's proposal for hybrid instruction. Scheduling more classes in the evening hours will benefit international students who will be more likely to take the classes during the day in their own timezones. Hybrid course delivery will release impacted classrooms into the availability pool for scheduling. Students who experience 'Zoom fatigue' could benefit from having their courses spread over longer periods of the day; and students who have to share space and/or Internet connections at home will experience lower pressure with more evening classes.

BCOE Student Affairs is generally supportive of the Administration's proposed efforts to accommodate as many on-campus and commuter students as possible with limited on-site instruction. At the same time, the safety of the staff members that will support these students cannot be ignored, and it is important to recognize that many of these staff members are older adults. Any member of the campus community with documented preexisting health conditions, belonging to an at-risk category, or living with an at-risk person must be able to continue working and/or learning remotely. At the same time, how can this be enforced? Will testing be a pre-requisite for anyone who wishes to return to campus? The administration should set up testing on-campus or in partnership with local healthcare providers to assess infection, quarantine or send home, and contact tracing. Protective glass should be installed to protect any employee who has regular contact with students or other visitors.

Scheduling for on-site courses should be comprehensive. Course offering times should be distributed throughout the day to control for demand at housing and dining facilities. It might be best to limit the student population targeted, such as offering lower-division courses primarily for freshmen and sophomores. It would be good, although perhaps challenging to implement, to give any student enrolled in a hybrid course the opportunity to attend some in-person course meetings, while ensuring adequate social distancing.

BCOE Student Affairs would like to comment on the proposal offer on-site instruction for graduate courses while continuing to teach undergraduate remotely. Graduate students are incredibly important to campus in terms of their support for research and undergraduate instruction; it seems likely that additional faculty and staff to support the graduate students would need to return as well, many of whom are more susceptible to COVID-19 due to age. Some type of testing regime would need to be put in place, as an outbreak in a laboratory or a department could have negative implications for both research and undergraduate instruction; that risk must be assessed. It is also worth noting that the majority of BCOE graduate students are international and lack the same local support networks that are available to our primarily domestic undergraduate student population.

The Administration's proposal did not address plans for staff to return to campus, and under what capacity they would return. Under the assumption that staff would return, BCOE student affairs expressed concern about their safety if they are expected to meet one-on-one with students in person. BCOE Student Affairs is housed in Skye Hall, across from the UCR International Affairs Office, which historically has a lot of traffic. A nearby conference room (Skye 346) is located nearby and is routinely used for document signing sessions for newly-arrived students from across the world. The elevator, restaurants, and common areas of Skye Hall are impacted, and many international students periodically enter the BCOE Student Affairs area when looking for the correct place to go. When the time comes to reopen BCOE Student Affairs, we encourage the administration to take these factors into account and to develop an appropriate social distancing protocol for Skye Hall.

The BCOE Executive Committee would like to thank the BCOE Student Affairs staff members who took the time and effort to put forward these thoughtful suggestions.

