

The UC Commission on the Future and the Edley Proposal for a Cyber-Campus: An Interim Report from the Berkeley Faculty Association May 12, 2010

Abstract

A group of preliminary recommendations of the UC Commission on the Future Working Groups, viewed in combination with Dean Edley's current plan for a "cyber campus," threaten the quality of UC undergraduate education, the right and ability of Senate faculty to safeguard educational standards, and the existence of a public university in which excellent students are taught by excellent research faculty.

Overview

The UC Commission on the Future (UCOF, also known as the "Gould Commission") is moving rapidly. The Commission will soon disseminate a final round of recommendations for comments from faculty, staff, students and the public. In the Fall, it will present prioritized final recommendations to the Regents. These will include some added by the UC Office of the President (UCOP) which, according to a recent report to the Divisional Council, disparaged the initial Working Group recommendations as weak and insubstantial. Accordingly, it is imperative that faculty be aware of the directions in which the Commission is moving and the future of UC is being conceived, even as the final set of recommendations will likely be more dramatic and draconian than those analyzed here.

In this brief report we outline the big picture that emerges from close scrutiny of the recommendations issued in March by the five UCOF Working Groups (Size & Shape; Education & Curriculum; Access & Affordability; Funding Strategies; and Research Strategies).¹ We also explain how the UCOF recommendations for streamlining undergraduate education link with plans for a cyber-campus (not part of the UCOF recommendations) recently outlined by law school dean Christopher Edley.

Certainly some positive and useful preliminary recommendations issued from the Working Groups. We applaud especially the "Research Strategies" recommendations, which focused on sustaining a premier university research environment across the disciplines in the context of a constricted higher education economy. We also support sound strategies for raising and using funds more effectively and for economizing and simplifying cumbersome operations.

¹ The UCOF preliminary recommendations may be read at http://ucfuture.universityofcalifornia.edu/presentations/cotf_wg_first_recs.pdf. UC Irvine Comparative Literature Professor Rei Terada has also offered an analysis of these recommendations that may be read at <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2010/03/ucof-education-and-curriculum.html>

Apart from plans for dramatically increasing student fees and enrollment of non-resident undergraduates, a cursory review of the individual recommendations may not suggest significant departures from trends already underway. Taken together, however, the preliminary recommendations from the Gould Commission Working Groups foreshadow a disturbing future for University of California faculty and students. This is a future of profoundly degraded undergraduate education, eroded faculty governance and control over curriculum, research delinked from teaching, and constricted access to UC by California's best high school students.

UC Commission on the Future Working Group Recommendations: Lowlights

The Working Group recommendations for new revenue sources call for continued annual tuition increases and an increase in Non Resident students. Recommendations for savings call for reduced time to degree and cheaper “instructional delivery systems”-- lecture-taught or on-line courses. Thus, future undergraduates will pay more for less. Measures for streamlining “throughput time to degree” include improving access to gateway courses and increasing transfers from community colleges (where UC can claim the degree while much of the cost of instruction is carried elsewhere). Most significant, however, is the proposal to create a pathway and student incentives for a three-year undergraduate degree. This would maximize use of high school AP and honors credits, summer term enrollment, and on-line courses, all of which effectively out-source an education once provided by UC faculty. But the three-year degree path would also require “streamlined major programs,” and “eliminate unnecessary course taking,” by “reducing excessive degree requirements.” Here, the danger is not only degraded education but centralized academic policy that undermines faculty control of academic standards and curriculum as well as campus autonomy. Three year degrees, of course are also incompatible with double majors, education abroad, and other rich elements of existing undergraduate offerings. Currently, many students of the humanities carry a second major in the sciences or professional schools. What does it mean to eliminate the prospects of humanistically educated engineers, doctors, lawyers and MBAs?

But compressed degrees are only one way in which the UCOF proposals threaten educational quality and faculty governance. Another set of cost-reduction proposals aims to “make more effective use of faculty resources” through frequent evaluations of faculty workload (presumably to increase it) and more careful scrutiny of course releases (presumably to reduce them). There are proposals for “changing faculty mix,” using non-Senate faculty to “backfill for instruction” and to separate teaching from research faculty. In short, the current reliance of summer session on graduate student and other lecturers would become the model for cost-effective UC undergraduate instruction. (Dean Edley’s proposal for a “cyber-campus,” discussed below, relies almost exclusively on non-Senate instructors for “high touch contact” with students.) Here it is important to remember that the connections between teaching and research have always distinguished undergraduate education at a research university and are what place the University of California in league with the Ivies.

Finally, the UCOF proposals for streamlining undergraduate education call for “a systemwide academic planning framework that incorporates campus goals with the context of priorities identified for the university as a whole.” Again, system-wide centralization of this sort

threatens Senate control of curriculum and campus autonomy. It is also out of step with recent trends to eliminate substantive academic features of UCOP, raising the fear that such centralized decision making would be detached from deliberations that are academically informed, and not simply contoured by revenue, cost and efficiency concerns.

In short, taking these proposals together, a picture emerges of undergraduates jammed through a mediocre education and ladder rank faculty substantially removed from both control over and involvement with undergraduate education. Undergraduate programs of study would be narrowed and shortened. More UC students would take fewer courses from a shrunken UC Senate faculty. Education Abroad programs, double-majors and non-required courses would be devalued if not eliminated. Faculty would have less say over breadth and major requirements and would face more academic standardization across the system.

These changes pave the way for the institution of an on-line degree program but, conversely, the policies and practices of the cyber model described below would surely seep into campus educational protocols. Finally, apart from being a picture of degraded undergraduate education and decreased faculty control, it is difficult to see how these plans are compatible with attracting large numbers of high-fee paying non-resident students or steep rises in tuition for California students. They presume that the UC brand can outlive declining caliber of education and educational experience on offer. For how long might this be true?

The Cyber Campus Proposal

The tendencies described above appear still more ominous when combined with the proposal for a UC "Cyber Campus" presented by UCB Law School Dean Edley On April 20, 2010, under the aegis of the Center for the Study of Higher Education.²

Edley's proposal for on-line instruction and degrees seeks to position the University of California as a leader in offering online education in what he termed "the quality sector." Edley identified the project as one in which the revenues from the project would eventually subsidize on-campus teaching, as the cyber campus made available UC courses and UC degrees to students around the world. The UC brand, Edley claimed, would be secured by the high level of tuition and technical ownership of courses by Senate faculty.

Edley's plan for developing the cyber campus involves a number of stages, beginning with the development of a few courses for on-campus students, through the establishment of sufficient lower division courses to offer an AA degree, followed by the production of courses

² Dean Edley is chair of the UCOF Education and Curriculum Working Group and special advisor to Mark Yudof. It is therefore unsurprising that his vision of a Cyber Campus reiterates and intensifies many features of the UCOF proposals. As one whose distinguished career has been entirely in law schools, many have questioned what expertise Edley brings to undergraduate education policy. A summary of Dean Edley's presentation on the Cyber Campus appears at <http://ucbfa.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/C.-Edley-talk-Tech-Evolution-to-Save-the-Elite-Public-Univ.pdf>. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on Edley's plan appears at <http://chronicle.com/article/In-Crisis-U-of-California/65445/>

comprising a BA degree along with courses to develop college readiness and, finally, the establishment of partnerships and courses for students around the world. The first several stages – essentially those covered by Gould Commission recommendations - would not yield significant increases in revenue. It is only when the UC brand can be sold in mass quantity that this project becomes a potential money maker for UC. As Edley put it, “the big payoff is when you do it at scale.”

Cyber campus courses, Edley said, would be “owned” by Senate faculty, but have separate “instructors of record” along with “squadrons of GSIs” who will be the “frontline of online contact.” Availability of GSIs (but one could also imagine poorly paid lecturers in this position) would constitute the only constraint on enrollment for these courses, a constraint that could easily lead to the hiring of barely or sub-qualified instructors in courses whose sole purpose is revenue generation. In this new “three tiered” faculty, the lowest tier--instructors and GSI’s--would have actual contact with students on line.

Edley described Senate faculty “attached to the conservatism of greatness” as his main obstacle in developing and implementing this plan. Indeed, to date, all faculty Senate committees consulted have opposed the cyber campus. Edley, however, noted that he does not need the preponderance of faculty to buy in, only to get out of the way of “a coalition of the willing.”

Our concerns about the Edley plan are many. We do not reject the use of on-line tools in teaching, but a) it is extremely difficult to develop and expensive to develop excellent on-line university courses and b) such courses are inappropriate for many subjects and types of learning. Thus, it is one thing to put a handful of courses on-line and quite another to sell UC undergraduate degrees this way. Since this project is wholly driven by entrepreneurial concerns, we worry that the UC brand alone will carry the burden of excellence, at least until it is too degraded to do so. This danger is intensified by the fact that since cyber-students need meet only the bare minimum of UC admissions thresholds, and will not be exposed to any of the academic-intellectual benefits of university culture, course standards will almost certainly need to be lowered to meet the skills and capabilities of the paying clientele. We are concerned as well that casting Senate faculty as an obstacle suggests a plan for an end-run around the Senate, a move that would further depress the quality of the enterprise and further undermine Senate oversight of the academic standards and content for a UC education. Of course, it is also likely that the whole thing will be a boondoggle: efforts at producing high-quality on-line liberal arts education have thus far met with dismal financial and educational failure.

Conclusion

Above all, we are concerned that the Cyber Campus plan in tandem with the UCOF recommendations discussed above portends a future of severely degraded undergraduate education, eroded faculty governance and a thorough gutting of the California Master Plan. From the student side, the picture is one of narrow technical training replacing a broad and deep university education provided by a first class research faculty. From the faculty side, the picture is one of Senate and non-Senate faculty alike demoted to a relatively powerless

workforce in a large entrepreneurial operation where the bottom line drives every educational policy and the University of California is reduced to a brand whose quality steadily declines even as its price steadily rises.

We fear that this future is extremely close. We urge faculty with a different vision for UC's future to speak up before it is too late.

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