

May 9, 2019

Kimberly Lau, Chair
Academic Senate, Santa Cruz Division

Re: Review of Final Draft of the Strategic Academic Plan

Dear Kim,

The Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) has reviewed the final draft of the Strategic Academic Plan (SAP). Our review had to be brief: we received the plan on April 15, at which point the agenda for April 24 was already full. With a May 13 deadline to respond, this meant that there was only *one* meeting where this could be on the agenda: May 1, with the draft letter placed on the consent agenda for May 8. This was while we were in the middle of reviewing program statements (with releasing the General Catalog in time for incoming students being our top priority), processing an urgent request from the Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education in time for the legislative deadline for the spring Senate meeting, and dealing with a crisis in classroom availability for the fall term about which we have written to the administration but with unfortunately — as of now — no response.

We provide such tedious details in the hope that the administration will realize that what may seem like a four week review period is whittled down, by the constraints of a democratic body that meets only once a week — despite the considerable amount of work we do online, some things have to be dealt with in a face to face discussion — and the demands of other urgent business, to a thirty minute discussion in one meeting. We understand the desire to wrap up the SAP before the departure of the CPEVC on June 30, but even an additional week would have given us two meetings to discuss the Plan, without significantly shortening the subsequent processing time available to the administration.

Perhaps the expectation was that this final review, dealing with the minor adjustments that have been made since the previous version, would not need to be extensive. And therefore, we start by acknowledging that the only comment we made in our letter of January 24, 2019, expressing concern about the role and purview of the Academic Oversight Committee and its potential to infringe on Senate jurisdiction, has been satisfactorily addressed, for which we thank the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

And yet, the changing top campus leadership compels us to take a broader view of the SAP than what we took in January, when we worked on the assumption that the key decisions that had been made would not be reopened:

From the beginning of the SAP process, CEP has called for the opportunity to evaluate the plan in a holistic way, which would include considering the likely impacts of supporting any particular initiative or plan—for example, what would be the likely impacts on undergraduate education more broadly, or in areas or ways not directly the focus of those of the initiative itself.

Repeatedly voicing such concerns, we see again that each initiative here, while it might be evaluated narrowly in its own terms, is likely to come at a cost, and we cannot in good faith

evaluate the value of the initiative if we are not given any kind of estimate of its likely cost, or told from where in the budget it may come so that we can consider what impacts its cost might have on the undergraduate curriculum in other ways. Therefore, while we again receive an invitation to comment and provide feedback, and we recognize that in some respects earlier feedback has been incorporated, we also insist that we are not being given a meaningful opportunity to evaluate these initiatives, whether on their own merits or in relation to each other.

We take, as an example, the second design principle, to increase “experiential learning” and research opportunities for undergraduates. Leaving aside for the moment the troublingly vague possibilities of what “experiential learning” may be (Is an undergraduate student who conducts market research amongst her peers, or collects personal data from them, at the behest and for the benefit of a for-profit company, benefitting from an “experiential learning” “internship”?) we note some fundamental problems with how this design principle and its accompanying goals and initiatives are articulated. We have raised such objections before, but since this draft is only very lightly revised, we repeat their spirit here:

- Why is “experiential learning” of specific concern, rather than the general improvement—or even, the slowing of the degradation of—our undergraduates’ learning overall opportunities and experiences? While experiential learning and research opportunities sound great, so do: the ability of students to take courses in subjects they’re interested in, the ability of students to get meaningful feedback from faculty about their work, the ability of students to take courses that help them tackle truly challenging material with the possibility of doing so successfully, the ability of students to make progress in their desired major, etc. “Experiential learning” sounds worryingly close to vocational education.
- Where will the resources come from to support “experiential learning” for students? If they come from FTE that might otherwise be used to hire faculty instructors, then “experiential learning” would literally come at the expense of students’ meaningful contact with instructors. It would be accompanied by larger class sizes, and so, in general, less meaningful faculty contact. In turn, larger class sizes means that access to other kinds of learning that we consider essential to the curriculum might be further jeopardized, such as discussion-style seminars. We repeat the point we made earlier in this letter about a crisis in classroom space that remains unaddressed, along with critical investments in the College Scholars Program (UCSC’s Honors Program) and the Career Center that CEP has called for this year, that are still not provided for. To us, these seem far more important than the embellishment of “experiential learning.”
- While we appreciate that this draft does acknowledge that particular care and thought needs to be taken to ensure that “experiential learning” is open to students regardless of their wealth, again, without any sense of the actual costs, or budgeting for them, we find this concern not well thought through in this goal as a whole. What sorts of “experiential learning” opportunities are likely to be available to students in an environment in which there are insufficient resources to create or support them? Those provided by for-profit industry and commerce.

Touching briefly on two of the four other design principles, the prioritization of “interdisciplinary connections” in research and teaching seems puzzling. Is it believed that we

are preeminent in all the disciplines in which we would want to establish strength, so that the greatest potential is now in *interdisciplinary* territory? The SAP mentions “a collaboration between biologists and a variety of social scientists” approvingly; is this a greater priority than ensuring that constituent departments such as MCD Biology, Psychology and Sociology are not bursting at the seams?

The design principle of engaging and supporting a diverse “faculty, staff, and student body” is unobjectionable, but all the initiatives except the rather vague last one of fostering an anti-bullying campus culture are aimed at students. Such a dissonance between a design principle and the initiatives that are supposed to promote it is puzzling.

As stated in earlier CEP responses to the SAP: The reliance on quantitative metrics as the measure of outcomes, worrying in itself, also skews toward some disciplines and away from others, and creates potentially perverse incentives for the administrators who may be evaluated on the basis of those metrics. If the measures are purely about the numbers of students engaging in experiential learning, then everyone involved has an incentive to cast aside concerns about quality in favor of achieving quantity, and, especially in a world of scarce funding, the for-profit world will be increasingly determining what those opportunities are.

We also agree with the observation of the Committee on Privilege and Tenure, that spending time on measuring a whole variety of things can itself cost time and money, at the expense of other activities. Given that UCSC probably has the worst faculty to undergraduate student ratio in the University of California system (excluding UC Merced and UC San Francisco), this is not the best use of our resources.

We hope that the broad comments above will prove useful, even if they were not quite what was expected. Given our concerns with the Strategic Academic Plan and our extremely limited time, we regretfully decline the administration’s invitation to prioritize the initiatives for each design principle.

Sincerely,



Onuttom Narayan, Chair
Committee on Educational Policy

cc: Academic Senate Chairs
Matthew Mednick, Director, Academic Senate