

2020 Faculty Athletics Representative Report (v1.1)



Executive Summary

The following report, written by UC Santa Cruz Faculty Athletics Representative (FAR) J. Xavier Prochaska, offers the FAR's perspectives on the state of NCAA Athletics at UC Santa Cruz during the COVID-19 plagued year of 2020. I first offer a brief snapshot of the program and then discuss feedback from a majority of the student-athlete population (~300 persons) who were consulted to provide recommendations/criticism/comments on their online-learning and recommendations for how to improve their UCSC experience. The primary issues and related recommendations are summarized as:

- 1) **Issue:** The majority of student-athletes report insufficient space to separate life, work, and study.

Recommendations: Have the University provide a safe, quiet and on-campus space for individual studying. Even 1 hour per week (by reservation only) would be a major boost to morale.
- 2) **Issue:** Synchronous lectures are frequently exceeding their allotted time slots and instructors are reported to be assigning a higher workload than previously. Too many synchronous classes are running long (10+ minutes) and too many asynchronous classes are requiring too many lectures.

Recommendations: Respect the student's time by restricting lectures to the allotted time and reduce the scope of class material covered as needed.
- 3) **Issue:** Many student-athletes report insufficient interaction with their instructors and their peers.

Recommendations: Make a communication platform like *Slack/Discord/Piazza* be a mandatory piece of the online learning experience, ideally with substantial Instructor engagement.

Status of the UCSC NCAA Athletics Program

The following is a brief, non-comprehensive report on the state of NCAA athletics at UCSC from the perspective of the FAR. Further detail on any aspect of the program may be directed to the Athletics Director, Sue Harriman.

UCSC maintains 15 competitive teams -- Men's and Women's Basketball, Men's and Women's soccer, Men's and Women's Track and Field, Men's and Women's Cross Country, Men's and Women's Swim and Dive, Men's and Women's Tennis, Men's and Women's Volleyball, and Women's Golf -- coached by 11 head, full-time staff and a comparable number of part-time assistant coaches and 2 associate head coaches. In 2019-2020, there were approximately 300 student-athletes rostered on the 15 teams. On March 13, 2020, concerns with COVID-19 ceased all competition, effectively ending the seasons of the winter sports (e.g. Men's and Women's Basketball) and cancelling the spring season of every sport. All of the affected athletes were granted an additional year of eligibility.

In Fall quarter 2020, with UCSC instruction almost exclusively on-line, most of the teams have been in-season without competition, strictly following all NCAA and UCSC guidelines. The degree of in-person activities varies by team according to the extent that social distancing can be maintained. Thus far the only in-person activity has been swim training at Cowell's beach which was eventually discontinued due to the cold water.

The remainder of teams train on-line together (e.g. Women's Golf takes weekly Zoom walks) and all spend time bonding. Rosters for the 15 teams are as full as previous seasons. Student-athletes are dispirited by the lack of competition but eager to maintain the community and, and to participate in any occasional athletic activity permissible under COVID protocols. Unlike many Division I programs, no additional COVID testing is being conducted, nor is it required for these non-competitive seasons.

Other important NCAA athletic highlights from 2020 include:

- Design and selection of a new Athletics Slug logo after an extensive and inclusive process.
- Development and selection of the first cohort for the Slugs Leading Up to Greatness (S.L.U.G.) Leadership Academy.
- Invested in the strength and conditioning program [VOLT](#) for Teams to assist coaches and athletic trainers help student athletes remain competitively fit.
- Refurbishment of the West Field House floor for NCAA and intramural sports.
- Four tournament championships in the ACAA conference and two NCAA tournament selections (Fall 2019).
- Men's swimming won their first league title in 30 years of program history at the PCSC meet in Monterey Park, CA.
- Nine teams became members of the newly named Coast 2 Coast Athletic Conference.
- The Women's Soccer Team led all academic honors in 2019-2020 with the highest cumulative GPA of any women's soccer team *in the UC system*.

- Allison (M. Soccer), Colosi (Cross Country/Track), Hayden Johnson (M. Cross Country), Marquardt (W. Cross Country), Mendoza (W. Golf), Muzzy (W. Cross Country/Track) were Academic All-American.
- 54 Academic All Conference awardees
- Paul Colosi became the first cross country/track athlete in school history with four-straight NCAA Championship appearances and was named Male Athlete of the Year at the annual Student Athlete Award Ceremony held virtually in June 2020.
- Women's Basketball defeated their first-ever opponent from Division II's CCAA conference, with a wire-to-wire win at Chico State in January 2020. Center Kaylee Murphy earned D3hoops.com All-Region third team, and was named Woman Athlete of the Year at the annual Student Athlete Award Ceremony held virtually in June 2020.

Student-Athlete Input on the UCSC Experience

This section provides the details on the processes and supporting information related to the Issues and Recommendations listed in the Executive Summary.

Process

During the Fall 2020 quarter, I met with each of the 15 Teams via Zoom and thereby the majority of student-athletes at UCSC. These are a diverse student body in effectively all metrics -- class, major, race, gender, birthplace -- and therefore may be considered relatively representative of the full student body. The meetings lasted ~1 hour each and I informed the students that I intended to write this report and present it to the EVC and (if possible) my fellow faculty. The input was voluntary and largely anonymous given the large cohort of persons involved.

While each Team discussion was open to any topic, I posed the following 3 questions to provide a framework:

1. How are you finding your second quarter of online learning? What are the positives and negatives? What strategies are you taking to cope?
2. What can faculty/admin do to improve your experience at UCSC?
3. How is COVID-19 treating you more generally? How are you maintaining your mental and physical health?

As the quarter went on, I identified recurring concerns/issues and made an effort to identify/develop recommendations for remedies.

Primary Issues and Recommendations

Issue: *The majority of student-athletes report insufficient space to separate life, work, and study*

COVID-19 has forced the majority of classes at UCSC online with effectively all instruction performed remotely. In addition, COVID-19 has greatly restricted our ability to interact socially; it even impacts one's ability to leave the house. For a majority of the student-athletes this implies many (>4) hours each day on the computer and typically in the same room and computer. From the discussion, it is clearly having a strong and negative impact on their mental state, their ability to concentrate and learn, and their impressions of attending UCSC. While a few students had the resources and space to generate separation between their living and study space, this was rare and frequently forced/artificial. I further suspect, although it was not extensively discussed, that the student-athletes are losing their connection to UCSC.

Recommendation: *Provide a safe, convenient, and on-campus space for individual studying.*

Since the end of summer 2020, the University has taken the necessary safety measures to permit a small (and growing) set of staff and researchers to return to work on campus. This includes myself, and I consider the protocols in place (e.g. on-campus COVID testing, training, daily symptom checks, limited persons per building) to be safe and effective.

Given the above, I recommend that the University begin to offer students the opportunity to study on campus. Indeed, I expect this is already in careful consideration by the Administration. And, from the discussions with the student-athletes, I offer a few brainstormed ideas that would have terrific, positive impacts on their UCSC experience:

- Provide outdoor study space for use on days without rain or heavy winds. Provide a desk, power and internet. See Cal Poly San Luis Obispo for an example.
- Provide indoor, socially distant study 'cubicles' at libraries and other available buildings with large and well-ventilated spaces.

These should be offered by reservation and only for those students who adhere to protocols similar to those of staff/faculty. *Let me emphasize:* even one day a week of out-of-home study would greatly improve the students' morale, mental health, and connection to campus. I assure you this has been my own experience with my (limited) return.

Last, I acknowledge that this on-campus option would bear additional COVID risks:

- increased potential exposure during transit to/from campus
- increased probability of students congregating at unsafe distances

Hopefully these are surmountable.

Issue: Synchronous lectures are frequently exceeding their allotted time slots and instructors are reported to be assigning a higher workload than previously.

Many of the student-athletes reported that synchronous lectures in their classes frequently run long. This is most often by 5-10min, but there were numerous reports of 30+ minutes. The negative impacts are substantial:

- conflicts with their other classes
- conflicts with their other planned life activities (including employment)
- a perceived lack of respect of one's time
- online burnout

On the latter points, I suspect the students steel themselves to focus for the full anticipated length of the lecture and then cannot find the strength to continue beyond the scheduled slot. This complaint was uniform throughout the Teams and, anecdotally, the strongest negative reactions were from students of color.

Similarly, but distinct, students frequently reported that asynchronous lectures that were longer than typical, both in duration and frequency. It is my expectation that faculty are finding it difficult (if not impossible) to cover the same material online as done in-person. I am sure they have good intentions when providing additional instruction, but it may be having the opposite of the intended effect.

Recommendation: Advise all instructors to (1) limit the synchronous lectures to the allotted slot and not a minute more; (2) avoid extra asynchronous material and new readings; (3) scale back the material covered, as required.

The students recognize this may mean learning less material than the in-person version. But the positive impact of the recommended changes far outweigh this possible negative impact.

Issue: Many student-athletes report insufficient interaction with their instructors and their peers.

It is not surprising that a negative outcome of online-learning is a reduced interaction between student and instructor. But let me enumerate the extent and diversity of negative impacts reported by the students:

- Lack of interaction reduces their ability to focus on lectures, especially online.
- With a few exceptions, the asynchronous lectures are highly disfavored (e.g. why bother with UCSC if *courseera* offers a similar product?)
- Without the simple end-of-class interactions, there is greater miscommunication, confusion, and related issues.

Recommendation: Require instructors to institute a communication platform like Slack, Discord, or Piazza to increase interaction, both student-to-student and student-instructor.

It was reported that the student-led platform named *discord* was common, especially in the STEM fields. Further, this platform is highly effective at promoting learning and mitigating the daily confusion on class organization accentuated by online learning. Very few (perhaps none) of these *Discord* sessions, however, include Instructor or TA participation. Having used *Slack* (a similar product) myself extensively for graduate student classes, I find it a vital and highly effective means of communication. I recognize, however, that any such platform needs to meet campus requirements on data security and student privacy. See [this link](#) for more information.

Related, but distinct, these students request an increased incidence of break-out-rooms, in-class polls, etc., i.e. activities designed to increase interaction.

Secondary Issues

Issue: Students report that a (small) number of the faculty lack the technical skills to effectively perform online instruction.

While many of us are now experts in Zoom, there are a small number of faculty without the experience leading to excessively poor instruction.

Recommendation: Offer an anonymous means for students to report on instructors with insufficient technical skills to teach effectively. The University would then assign IT support accordingly.

Disclaimer

I readily acknowledge that some of my recommendations may violate academic freedom, COVID protocol, or Administrative policy. Indeed, I am now sharing this report with key Admin and the Academic Senate to vet the substance. Nevertheless, the reader is encouraged to take efforts to meet them in spirit if not precise substance. Related, instructors should assess these issues amongst their students themselves.