

## **ICAS Statement on Online Education**

### **April 26, 2013**

The Academic Senates of California's three segments of public higher education support the use of online technology in college-level teaching and learning. Indeed, faculty from all segments have already embraced the appropriate use of online educational resources to facilitate the student learning experience, both as supplements to face-to-face instruction and in the form of fully online courses. As a result, the public higher education institutions of California currently offer many robust and varied online course offerings.

Faculty also recognize that online education cannot meet all of the educational objectives of students and faculty in all cases, and that its utility for addressing the higher education access issues of the state is therefore limited. Online education is not the most appropriate pedagogy for some students and some courses. Success and retention rates are typically lower in the distance education modality and are alarmingly low in basic skills courses. Furthermore, the online modality exacerbates the disparities by ethnicity already evident in higher educational attainment.

Likewise, online instruction cannot address the interplay of California's access issues and budgetary concerns regarding higher education. Online instruction is not a less-expensive modality that can be used to lower costs while still educating more students at the level of quality they have come to expect, and it therefore cannot solve access issues created by state funding cuts. Rather, online courses increase access only when the lack of access is due to space, temporal, or geographical constraints.

One significant recent development in online education is the emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs). While MOOCs may serve as a useful supplement for a college course, as preparation for taking a course, or as a review of information for a student who has previously completed a course, they cannot replace the direct instructor-student interaction that is essential to student success in college courses. Without more direct contact between faculty and students, MOOCs raise numerous issues regarding the quality and integrity of their instructional methodology. For these reasons, while MOOCs may ultimately serve a purpose in higher education, that purpose cannot involve replacing regular classroom or online instruction, and thus MOOCs cannot directly address issues of access and cost in California's higher education systems.

Faculty are deeply concerned about ensuring quality in our instructional programs. Each of our segments has its own means of guaranteeing the quality of its online offerings, and the long-standing relationships between the segments enable students to take faculty-approved online courses from any segment and transfer those units seamlessly to another. We recognize the critical role instructor-student interaction plays in ensuring quality through student engagement and persistence and the critical role that a qualified faculty member must play in any educational experience. This role is even more critical in the online realm, and only the faculty can offer and guarantee that high-quality experience.

As with other aspects of education, online education could benefit from new investments in infrastructure to facilitate student access to our existing offerings, take advantage of the lack of geographical barriers afforded by the online modality, and potentially fill open seats in upper division, graduate, or capstone courses that are critical to meeting students' educational goals. California could profit greatly from investment in professional development to ensure faculty awareness and understanding of the latest technologies and how to use those technologies in an accessible and effective manner and from professional support that could enhance our existing online offerings.

As with any professional endeavor, development of online education requires continual investment to ensure that we can meet current student needs, preserve student choice, improve the student experience, and identify new unmet needs. In evaluating the effectiveness of online education, we must continue to make evidence-based decisions. Varied offerings produced by a faculty-led effort and based on sound research will provide California's students with the educational experience they need and deserve.

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