

Graduate Council Statement on the Review of Online Degrees

Approved: November 5, 2012

I. Preamble

Online education, technologies and expectations are changing rapidly, which motivates the Graduate Council (GC) to establish guiding principles for online graduate degree and course development. During this time, academic excellence must be at the forefront of decisions about online delivery of lessons, courses and degrees; as with all Berkeley degrees, we expect online degrees to contribute to the dual goals of access and excellence. Specific to degree programs, the Graduate Council insists that all degrees, whether online or on-campus, reflect the same high quality that characterizes any Berkeley degree.

The rapid evolution of online technologies is also manifesting itself in on-campus courses, which are evolving as quickly as, or perhaps more quickly than, online courses. The increasing integration of online methods and novel technologies into courses delivered on campus creates a continuum of delivery mechanisms, extending from the use of chalkboards to multi-media lectures to flipped classrooms to synchronous online elements to asynchronous delivery. The principles outlined in this document will focus on graduate degrees that are primarily delivered online, but they are broadly conceived so that they can be applied across the continuum of instructional approaches.

The use of online delivery of degrees has been primarily centered on professional Master's degrees, not Bachelor's degrees or research-based graduate degrees. We believe this focus is appropriate due to the balance between training and experiential learning in each of these degrees. Even for professional Master's programs, the degrees are distinguished from simple collections of courses by a number of factors: (a) development of a cohort of students and a sense of community, (b) the completion of capstone projects and/or comprehensive exams that require integration of individual courses or higher level evaluation, and (c) academic and career advising and the development of professional connections. These are the elements that must be integrated with high-quality courses in order for an online degree to be successful, and consideration of these factors shape the principles outlined in the next section.

II. Principles for Online Degrees

The following points summarize the principles that the Graduate Council believes need to be considered when evaluating a degree proposal that involves novel delivery mechanisms. They do not address the potential for online delivery of research-based graduate degrees or academic Master's degrees; they are focused on the delivery of professional Master's degrees. We believe these principles are particularly important when the degree is primarily delivered online, but they should also be considered in the context of hybrid degrees. We note that general guidelines for new degree proposals are provided by the Graduate Division (http://www.grad.berkeley.edu/program_proposal/index.shtml) and a recent task force developed guidelines specific to self-supporting degree programs

(<http://evcp.chance.berkeley.edu/Reports/indexReports.htm>). Proposing units should also refer to these resources when developing new degree proposals.

1. *Development of a cohort and connections between students and peers and between students and faculty is one of several elements that create a Berkeley degree.* Proposing units need to be cognizant of how the mix of in-person, synchronous and asynchronous delivery will lead to the establishment of a cohort, and a sense of community among the participants in the degree.
2. *Degree programs must ensure more integrative, higher-level thinking and analysis than can be achieved in individual courses.* Capstone projects and comprehensive exams are one element of a degree program that ensure this, but there are additional resources for on-campus students, including seminar series, guest lectures and other discussions, as well as interactions that create informal opportunities to develop the intellectual maturity that characterize graduates of Berkeley programs. Proposing units must consider how the capstone requirement, as well as in-person, synchronous and asynchronous elements, work together to ensure this degree requirement is met.
3. *The high admissions standards that characterize Berkeley degree programs must be maintained when pursuing new markets for students.*
4. *As they become available online, broad campus resources and experiences (performances, lectures, exhibits, etc.) should be made available to participants in online degree programs.* In addition to the cohort within a program and the individual integration of course material described in the first two principles, a Berkeley education includes a distinct experience that is shaped by the campus and the community. Online students will naturally be somewhat disconnected from campus life, but increasing online availability of elements of this experience can provide connections between these students and the campus community, which could mitigate this aspect of online degree delivery.
5. To ensure excellence of instruction and degrees while maintaining a long-term perspective, *Senate members must be involved with the development and evaluation of individual courses and degrees.* Conversion of an existing course to an online course should be led by a faculty member who is experienced with teaching the course in a traditional classroom to provide expert judgment regarding content, structure, and style of presentation. This is particularly true in the case of asynchronous delivery, where there is no real-time feedback from students that allows an instructor to gauge the effectiveness of his/her delivery. While this may be mitigated, to some extent, by synchronous delivery, the feedback from students to instructor will still be filtered and less effective, which should be a consideration during both course development and delivery.
6. *New degrees that use novel delivery mechanisms must not weaken existing on-campus degrees due to diversion of faculty, graduate student instructor (GSI) or other resources.* Proposals for new degrees should consider the impact of the degree on the faculty and GSI population in the offering unit, and develop a clear plan for the sustained delivery of the degree, including both short-term course development and long-term course offerings.
7. *Degrees that make significant use of novel delivery mechanisms (whether synchronous or asynchronous) should be subjected to elevated internal scrutiny.* Feedback and

reviews will both ensure continual excellence and allow for the campus community to learn about the benefits and risks of these new pedagogical approaches. For these degrees, the Academic Senate should receive annual updates from the unit offering the degree and the degree should undergo a complete review after four years (assuming that this allows for the completion of the degree by two or three cohorts). As part of the degree proposal, we expect proposing units to map out in detail what will be involved in evaluating the pedagogical success of their degree. Specific elements that should be considered in the evaluation, and described in the degree proposal, include: defining the degree objectives, including the fundamental educational goals as well as the specific objectives related to the online delivery method, developing metrics to define the extent to which the degree meets the objectives, and identifying an external evaluation panel.

8. *The investment of resources during the development or delivery of a degree program should not be compromised.* The development of an online degree program is expensive and time-consuming, both at the scale of individual courses and for the degree as a whole, and on-going investment is necessary to maintain and update material. A course is more than a self-study with online lectures and a degree is more than a collection of courses; these principles must be accounted for in planning the development and delivery of an online degree. To guide the program's development, it is important that the pedagogical goals for the degree be stated explicitly and that the investment of resources be evaluated based on these goals. A strong degree proposal should include a careful and thorough accounting of the costs and investments associated with the degree development, delivery, and on-going updating and maintenance. This analysis should include consideration of competitors, both current and future, due to the fact that online degrees do not have the geographic barriers to entry that in-person degrees do.
9. *Advance development and prototyping of courses can be effective at preventing problems during rollout of the degree program.* A potential pitfall for online degree programs is that they can be fabricated *de novo* without the development of any previous online courses. This approach produces an immense workload and could easily scuttle the success of an online degree. To facilitate a successful program, we encourage departments to develop courses, or at least prototypes, in advance of developing the entire degree program so that the approach and tools can be adequately evaluated and modified before the major investment is made in developing the entire program.
10. *The technology used for delivering course content cannot become an instructional barrier.* To ensure that faculty, instructors and GSIs are able to work effectively in the online environment, particularly when a mix of synchronous and asynchronous approaches is used, it is important that degree programs provide resources and training to help navigate the technology from the instructional side. Such training could be achieved by holding short courses/workshops on an annual or bi-annual basis, delivered by experts in online instruction and the particular tools being applied.
11. *The degree name should reflect market expectations and needs.* There is great diversity in the nature of online degrees and expectations vary between fields and disciplines. A proposing unit should address the demands and expectations for the degree being developed and make a compelling case for their chosen degree name.

This case should include benchmarking with comparable degree programs to the extent that they exist.

III. Review of Degrees

We support the recommendation that new degrees that are primarily delivered online be reviewed after four years, and suggest that the following questions could serve as the basis for that review.¹ As faculty and departments develop their proposal, they may want to consider these questions as well, since they reflect the principles outlined in the previous section.

1. What is the quality of the admitted students (e.g., test scores, GPA) compared to on-campus degrees offered by your unit, or peer programs at other institutions (if known)? How does the diversity of your admitted students compare to similar on-campus and peer institution programs?
2. To what extent has the degree met its objectives as laid out in the initial proposal? What metrics have been used to measure these outcomes and how have the evaluations been done?
3. What changes, if any, have been made in the delivery of the degree, either for individual courses or for integrating components of the degree (e.g., developing a community, the capstone project, advising)? What changes are anticipated in the next four years?
4. Have there been changes in the competitive environment (e.g., new programs at peer institutions) that have changed the landscape for this degree?
5. What is the degree of student satisfaction in the advising and community-building aspects of the degree program?
6. What has been the educational benefit of the capstone project or comprehensive exam?
7. Has offering the online degree program affected any on-campus programs (positively or negatively)? If so, how?
8. How and to what extent have campus-wide resources been drawn into the online program? Have there been any benefits for students in the online program?

¹ Final report of the Online Graduate Degrees Working Group (2010).