

The Fortnightly

March 24, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

In these difficult times, we hope you are safe and well, and finding some respite from the news. It is a strange kind of challenge we face, which we will overcome together—but by staying physically apart. In that spirit, your Division Council (DIVCO) Zoomed twice last week to address an unusually dense agenda, although we had met the previous week as well.

DIVCO discussed the following topics during the pair of meetings this week

- Dropping the SAT/ACT Essay subtest for admissions
- The [report](#) of the systemwide Standardized Testing Task Force
- A [grading policy](#) for the spring semester of 2020
- The proposed Electronic Intelligent Systems major
- The [sixth strategic initiative](#)

A discussion of DIVCO's deliberations can be found appended to the end of this newsdigest. The Senate will be working on a variety of topics over the next two weeks, including formulating guidance about final exams, an updated online resource for instructors, and deliberating remote instruction for summer sessions.

As you shelter in place, be safe and well. We thank all those who are working tirelessly on behalf of the university: undergraduate and graduate students who are helping their fellow students in this time of need, instructors learning to teach on Zoom and the staff who are working long hours to help them in this mission, graduate students who have had to rapidly pivot their research plans, the Chancellor and her administration who are putting in extraordinary hours to help steer the campus through these times, the custodial staff who are deep-cleaning a near-empty campus, Student Services staff managing to continue their jobs remotely, staff in Housing and Dining who are providing shelter to so many of our students, medical staff in University Health Services dealing with an unprecedented crisis, and countless other members of the Cal Community. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. You are our heroes. And even in dark times, Fiat Lux.

Sincerely,

Oliver O'Reilly
Chair of the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate
Professor of Mechanical Engineering

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks
Vice Chair of the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate
Professor of Demography and Sociology

Discussion of DIVCO's Deliberations on Monday, March 16, and Wednesday, March 18, 2020

Eliminating the SAT/ACT Essay Subtest for Admissions

Your Senate Committee on Admissions, Enrollment, and Preparatory Education (AEPE), chaired by Berkeley Faculty Service Award winner Ignacio Navarette, has been hard at work over the past several months to understand and respond to two reports related to **standardized testing for undergraduate admissions**. BOARS (the Systemwide committee corresponding to AEPE on our campus) has recommended that the University of California stop requiring an Essay subtest of the SAT and ACT. These tests are used by only a very few colleges or universities except UC and have low predictive power. AEPE and DIVCO both supported the BOARS recommendation.

The Report of the Systemwide Standardized Testing Task Force

The second issue is more contentious. The Board of Regents has been discussing the complete elimination of the use of the SAT & ACT standardized tests in UC admissions, as part of a broader project of trying to make the demographics of the UC student body more closely resemble the demographics of the state. The Systemwide Senate put together a task force to evaluate how the SAT & ACT are currently used on the nine campuses with undergraduate programs and the probable effects of eliminating both the SAT & ACT on excellence and inclusion. Their report—known as [the STTF report](#)—was made available several months ago. It argues that the SAT is highly imperfect, but that it is still useful. In particular, our admissions offices use the SAT to evaluate individual students in relation to their neighborhood and school contexts, allowing them to identify high-achieving students in disadvantaged high schools. Because it is used this way, the STTF report argues, SAT & ACT scores increase, rather than decrease, diversity at the UC. For this reason, the STTF report proposes that we should not eliminate the use of the SAT & ACT until we have created our own, better admissions test, which could serve a similar function but without some of the known biases in the SAT & ACT. This, they predict, would take something like nine years. A minority report supports the thrust of the main report, but proposes moving faster: within five years. The cost of the new standardized test would be in the range of \$150M.

After several weeks of discussion, AEPE wrote in support of both the main report and the minority amendment. The SAT, they argue, provides important information and is actually used to increase diversity, by allowing us to find talented students in disadvantaged neighborhoods whom we might otherwise miss. However, the test is flawed, and so replacing that function with a better instrument is important, and should be done as quickly as feasible. DIVCO debated this issue at both meetings this week, and then finally voted to endorse the AEPE letter.

A Grading Policy for the Spring Semester of 2020

The second challenging issue for DIVCO concerned **grading options for this semester**. You will by now have seen the outcome of these long deliberations: undergraduate grades will be set to P/NP by default, but students will still have the option to request letter grades, and there will be no change to the already more lenient policies for graduate students. This one-semester exceptional change will require departments and colleges to adjust a variety of requirements, concerning access to and progress through majors, as well as academic probation. Those

concomitant changes are underway, as it is clear to all that the disruptions of this semester make it unrealistic to expect that students (or faculty!) can perform as if nothing were changed.

Coordinating the rollout of the policy took careful planning with Systemwide Academic Senate, the Committee on Courses and Instruction (COCI), and the Council of Undergraduate Deans. On Friday, a pair of messages were sent out. The [first](#) at 11:51am was to instructors and the [second](#), at 12:00pm, was for the entire campus community. In the coming week, Colleges will be providing additional details to students about the policy. Please ask your students to be patient while these details are being rolled out. Making sure the details are correct is important for themselves and their classmates and well as for future students.

The Proposed Electronic Intelligent Systems Major

DIVCO also addressed the proposed creation of a new concentration within the L&S Computer Science major, called “ **Electronic Intelligent Systems**,” focused on robotics and artificial intelligence, with a heavier focus on mathematics than in the standard major track. DIVCO had previously considered an earlier draft of this proposal, and this iteration addresses some of the concerns expressed at that time. However, Undergraduate Council, through its chair Jonah Levy, notes that in this version, transfer students continue to face high barriers to access to the major track. Other members expressed concern about the intersection of this major track and the new Division of Computing, Data Science, and Society. DIVCO decided to convey issues related to Transfer Studies and the changes in the Data Science Major since 2017 in their response letter.

The Sixth Strategic Initiative

Our fourth major topic this week was to respond to the report on the final Strategic Initiative implementation working group. Whereas the five other Strategic Initiatives focus on particular substantive topics, such as “Equality, Equity, and Opportunity” or “Environmental Change, Sustainability, and Justice,” the final report is called “[Lighting the Way to the Public Research University of the Future](#),” and it focuses on the creation of an endowment for graduate student fellowships. DIVCO members expressed universal support for seeking additional resources for graduate students, because of their centrality to our scholarly mission and the gravity of their underfunding. However, there was also a strong sense that the public research of the university of the future is much more complex and multifaceted than graduate student funding, so that there is a missed opportunity here to ask bold questions about who we are and where we are going as an institution. As ever, DIVCO will send formal comments on this proposal back to the administration.

Additional Topics

In addition to these four topics on which DIVCO had to make formal decisions, we discussed two additional topics of importance, but on which decisions will be forthcoming later. The **wildcat strike by graduate student instructors** (GSIs) began last Monday, with some GSIs in at least 15 departments engaged in a full work stoppage. The Graduate Council, chaired by John Battles, posted a [useful discussion of the history and context](#) and DIVCO discussed whether it would be constructive for us to make a formal statement, without reaching consensus. The Committee on Academic Planning and Resource Allocation, chaired by Paul Fine, wrote a response to **Academic Financial Reform** that was announced by the Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost in January. DIVCO discussed whether to endorse the response or revise it, but again without resolution yet.