

REPORT OF THE KEY ACADEMIC INDICATORS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

2004-05

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SUMMARY OF COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The campus academic leadership has, for several years now, sought to develop a meaningful and coherent set of academic key indicators that can inform our academic and administrative decision-making processes. There is inherent value in having a common set of data that will create an expectation for how leaders should look at their individual organization, both in relation to similar UCLA organizations and with peer institutions. Having such data can advance the self-advocacy of each unit and encourage leaders to move in directions that will ultimately benefit the campus as a whole.

The report from the 2003-04 key academic indicators group recommended, among other things, the development of a new standing committee, reporting to the EVC/Provost that would continue the process of refining and expanding the set of indicators; promote the ways by which the administration can integrate this work into on-going decision-making processes; and advise the administration on their use and interpretation.

The committee for 2004-05 was constituted by EVC and Provost Neuman in November and included faculty from Education & Information Studies, Engineering, The Division of Humanities, Law Management, Music, Physics/Astronomy, Psychology, and Theater, Film and Television. A request for nominations for membership on the new key academic indicators advisory committee went to the professional school deans, the executive dean of the College, and to the Academic Senate. The composition of the committee was based on nominations from deans and the relevant Academic Senate committees. The committee was charged with the responsibility of refining and expanding the set of existing indicators as well as helping develop greater faculty awareness of the process.

More specifically, the committee was guided by the recommendations from the 2003-04 committee which included the directive to: (1) provide contextualizing information to accompany the indicators; (2) consider their applicability at the departmental level; (3) correct and improve the indicators and plan to release successive generations; (4) ensure that benchmarking is feasible; (5) take into account major differences among disciplinary areas; (6) develop other approaches to improve understanding and encourage use of the indicators; and (7) ensure continued consultation and communication about the indicators and their interpretation.

Since most committee members were new to the process, the matter of introducing, understanding and discussing the key academic indicators was an important part of the process. The focus, content and length of these discussions by faculty members brought together specifically to advise on key academic indicators suggests the difficulties that deans might have in discussing the process with department chairs and the faculty in general and also suggested some ways of addressing these difficulties. Departmental and decanal responses reinforced the committee's impression that many departments and divisions have deep concerns about the validity of such comparisons and the uses to which such indices might be put. This impression of widespread concern and suspicion leads to our most fundamental recommendation: that the construction of any such indicators follow a series of meetings with divisions and

departments, in which all be reassured about the good judgment with which such indices will be interpreted.

The most important recommendations from the Committee will be summarized below. The appendices which follow provide more detail on the deliberations of the committee, the responses from nine department chairs to the committee's request for comments on existing indicators as well as the identification of additional indicators of academic quality, and the progress to date on the development of a web-based platform for providing access to the data.

1. Confidence building: Committee discussions and departmental consultations suggested that this process may have put carts before horses. For the campus to engage in useful suggestions about academic indicators, academic leaders and their constituencies need to believe that such indicators will be deployed in thoughtful and discerning ways. That belief does not now exist. This is regrettable since good data provides the basis for good decisions, but we would be remiss not to report the widespread incidence of skepticism in relation to this enterprise. We believe that some concerted effort by administrators to explain the expected uses and, equally, the understood limitations of such data would allay the concerns. We think this issue is, by an order of magnitude, our most significant recommendation.
2. Contextualized interpretation: The problem is (and this is one that will need to be addressed on a continuing basis) that the university and its units are not closed systems, but dynamic, open-ended, ever expanding systems that need constant monitoring by a great variety (or diversity) of monitors and gauges. In other words, we have no problem with these tables as indices; every good book deserves an index. But the index is never a substitute for the text, one has to sit down and read the book, or at least the chapters--along with footnotes that relate to the problem for which one is trying to gain a better understanding. The continued development of the key academic indicators should emphasize context and provide means for the administration to properly interpret the data.
3. Benchmarking: The relevant benchmarks should be the schools that UCLA competes against for students and faculty. The danger of a key academic indicator system based upon non-relevant indicators is that it would be a recipe for mediocrity. More simply put, we need to avoid a situation on this campus where in order to maintain our funding or resource base, we are forced to take actions that either harm us in our competition with other schools or that cause us to behave in ways that are contrary to the objectives of a first-rate research and teaching institution. However, the committee also recognizes the difficulty of obtaining valid and reliable comparison data from other institutions or national databases. Still, benchmarking should remain a goal during the continued development of this process.
4. Minimize work for department chairs and staff: The committee strongly believes that continued development of the key academic indicators should draw from existing sources of data, regular Senate program reviews, and perhaps academic personnel dossiers to the extent possible. Department chairs and staff are already dealing with multiple demands and deadlines with limited resources. Ideally, this project should reduce some of the demands for data reporting at the departmental level (through centralization of data and resources). Departments should, at the very least, suffer no increase in workload.

5. Simplify some of the indicators: The current definitions of the key academic indicators, as displayed in the 2003-04 committee report, are intended to normalize data so that the report can be used as a stand-alone, published document. Where measures fluctuate from year to year or scale varies widely among units, the data are presented as percentages, ratios, or multi-year averages. For example, gifts fluctuate from year to year so the current version specifies a three-year average. However, the current definitions delay report production and complicate design of an ad hoc query system. Perhaps most importantly, the definitions and report structure do not support evaluation of trends in the indicators. Gradual accumulation of data and the automated query system will allow end users to view multiple years of data at once. Data fluctuations will be evident, so that a unit need not be evaluated solely on the basis of a “down” year. For these reasons, AIM proposes shifting from the three year averages to single year measures as multi-year query capability evolves.
6. Transparency: The committee recommends that most, if not all, of the key academic indicator data be made available to deans and department chairs for their review and reflection. If deans and chairs are given access to comparison data for all academic entities, they can better understand not only the contributions of their own school/division/department, but also better understand which areas need improvement. If access is to be provided for deans and department chairs, we recommend that an orientation be provided to help them understand the functionality (e.g. unit comparisons, interactivity, “what if” analyses, and the ability to add comments) of the key academic indicators platform.
7. Standing committee: Finally, we recommend that the administration continue to facilitate consultation and review by the faculty of the project as it evolves. A standing committee should be constituted that meets several times a year to assess progress. Regular and systematic faculty review of some sort is necessary if the project is going to be widely accepted and used by academic entities across campus.