

The following message is being sent to all Senate members, academic assistant deans, and academic department managers.

UC SANTA BARBARA

Academic Senate

Divisional Chair's Newsletter

January 11, 2022

Dear Colleagues,

The sudden emergence of the new Omicron variant and its associated logistical challenges have made for a turbulent start to our winter quarter. I want to thank all instructors who used their too-brief winter break to rapidly revise their teaching plans in order to pivot quickly to remote instruction for the first two weeks. On short notice, our superbly efficient campus COVID-19 testing facility had to staff up to test all returning students, and it was simply impossible to do so prior to or even coincident with the start of instruction on January 3. In this context, the change to remote instruction was necessary, despite the very short notice and enormous inconvenience to most of you.

Events since the beginning of winter quarter have continued to evolve rapidly, and I am writing to provide you with some background about the decisions that have been announced. Until a few days ago, our plan was to accomplish the testing, allow for any isolation periods, then revert to in-person instruction on January 18. Housing, Dining, and Auxiliary Enterprises estimates that perhaps half of our students have returned to the local area already; for some, this is their primary residence and they depend on their housing here. We expected a large number of positive tests in this group, but we are confident that our campus is still highly protected from serious illness by our near-total vaccination (and an already very high rate of booster dose uptake, confirmed by Student Health Services to be over 75%), as well as universal masking.

Fortunately, Student Health Services is managing well and, as far as we are aware, none of the students who have tested positive on campus this year have required more than brief medical attention. I truly hope this will continue to be the case. Nevertheless, the breakthrough infections are a concern for our quarantine/isolation housing capacity, as well as our ability to keep up with contact tracing. In addition, many areas of campus are experiencing significant staffing

shortages due to breakthrough infections and required isolation periods. Together with a more general staff shortage due to a large number of unfilled positions, there is tremendous pressure on our hard-working staff. In these circumstances, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain campus operations at levels needed to provide services to a larger number of students. Other UC campuses are reporting similar experiences.

On Thursday last week, UC San Diego became the first UC to announce a further 2-week delay in the return to in-person instruction, followed by other campuses over the course of the ensuing 36 hours. On Friday, our COVID-19 working group recommended that we slow down the return of students to our campus as well, in order to better manage the logistical challenges. In this recommendation, we are aligned with all of our sister UCs. After consulting with the Senate and student representatives, our Chancellor sent a communication on Saturday extending the period of remote instruction and informing our students that they were no longer required to return to campus by January 12. In this situation, there are two possible ways we can deliver instruction for the rest of this month: either fully remote, or in-person while allowing for remote participation.

The discussion about instructional modalities for the remainder of January was especially difficult. Faculty have communicated clearly that dual mode instruction is very challenging, especially on short notice, and is not reasonable to require broadly of instructors. At the same time, we are sensitive to the impacts of remote learning, which has created enormous challenges that fall disproportionately on our most vulnerable students. In addition, we acknowledge the tremendous toll of the extended isolation students have endured during the pandemic on their mental health. Our students have shown us how much in-person instruction means to them, by being exceptionally cooperative with the COVID-19 mitigation protocols (their compliance with required vaccination and testing ranks near the top in the UC system). As it becomes increasingly clear that the pandemic will remain with us in various forms for the foreseeable future, we need to start thinking about making more finely tuned risk-benefit assessments regarding instructional delivery.

I consulted with the Senate's Executive Council about whether it was appropriate to empower our faculty to decide whether to offer an in-person component to their courses in the second half of January. Our discussions were informed by the knowledge that our strong COVID-19 mitigation protocols give us more flexibility than we had in the first half of 2021, making our campus a much less risky place to be than many others in the county at this time. In-person instruction is consistent with current public health guidance, and our local public schools remain open to serve younger students. While we are troubled by accounts of health care workers struggling to deal with this latest phase of the pandemic, their message to us is: be vaccinated, get your booster shots, wear high-quality masks, stay at home when you're sick. As responsible citizens, we are doing all of these things.

While the Council was not unanimous in its opinion, most members felt that we should trust our faculty to decide what is best for their courses, their students, and their personal circumstances. Consequently, UC Santa Barbara is allowing instruction to be conducted in person, for individual faculty and students who are willing, with the proviso that no one should be excluded from teaching or learning or penalized in any way during this difficult time if they decide instead to engage remotely. In addition, in-person instruction is allowed where the pedagogy is simply not appropriate for online delivery, such as labs and performance classes. I note here that [UC Berkeley](#) is allowing its instructors to teach in-person undergraduate lecture classes in a hybrid mode, and to teach lab sections, studio courses, fieldwork, clinical courses, and graduate seminars in-person in January; this month, [UC Davis](#) is encouraging its instructors in laboratory, fieldwork, capstone, studio, performance, and other similar courses to teach in person, with no permission required. We fully expect that many UC Santa Barbara instructors will decide to continue remote instruction for the rest of the month, and we support their decision unreservedly. I remind everyone of our campus [policy](#) that no instructor should feel pressured and no one will be penalized for negative evaluations related to remote teaching during pandemic quarters.

I sincerely hope we will be able to return to normal in-person teaching and learning soon, as the Omicron surge subsides and our students return to our campus to finish the academic year with a much stronger educational experience. In the meantime, I thank you for talking with and supporting your students as we chart a course through this difficult month together.

Sincerely,
Susannah Scott
Chair, Santa Barbara Division



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