

Academic Organization of UC Davis: A White Paper to Spur Conversation

Background

The academic enterprise of UC Davis is broadly organized into four colleges (Agricultural & Environmental Sciences; Engineering, Biological Sciences, and Letters & Sciences) and six professional schools (Education, Law, Medicine, Management, Nursing, and Veterinary Medicine).¹

The College of Letters & Sciences (L&S) is further comprised of three divisions: Humanities, Arts & Cultural Studies (HArCS); Mathematical and Physical Sciences (MPS); and the Division of Social Sciences (DSS). While each of the three L&S divisions is administratively led by a dean, each dean exercises college-wide responsibility for a portion of centralized services. Specifically, the HArCS dean oversees development, the DSS dean advising, and the MPS dean information technology management. The title “convening dean” rotates among them (academic) quarter-by-quarter.

A steering committee of faculty within MPS has recommended, citing a variety of aims, that the division become a stand-alone College. Of course, college reorganizations are not unheard of. Indeed, as recently as 2005 the College of Biological Sciences (CBS), formerly a division within both CAES and L&S, was reorganized and officially established as a college. The very fact, of course, that the Biological Sciences have already exited L&S means that the prospect that MPS might follow suit may be seen to pose an existential question for L&S. To pose the question “whither MPS?” may not literally require first asking the question “whither L&S?,” but few if any will feel that the one question can be given a satisfactory answer without pondering the other.

And there is much to be gained by taking the opportunity to think more broadly about the principles that should inform college organization. It is a fact that, in contrast to other campuses with other structures, including some with a single college for undergraduates, we have six units, three of which currently share a name and some services. Sharing of services may afford certain efficiencies, but neither efficiency nor simplicity is a value worth pursuing if our organizational structures are not able to afford students appropriate levels of guidance and advice in support of their educational goals. Of course, our organization into schools, colleges and divisions must support our university’s tripartite mission of teaching, research and public service. Each of these entities is home to graduate or professional students, staff, and faculty. Ideally, our schools, colleges and divisions are optimally constituted to foster communication and collaboration, are optimally shaped to advance scholarship and research, are optimally sized for the responsible stewardship of resources and management of the various business and personnel processes our university system requires. However much there is collaboration between and among schools, colleges, and divisions – and UC Davis is rightly proud of its reputation for generative interdisciplinary work – each represents a coherent academic domain and

¹ Standard University of California nomenclature refers to academic entities that educate undergraduates in addition to providing graduate education as “colleges”, while entities that primarily educate post-baccalaureate students and confer professional degrees are “schools.”

projects a recognizable identity, one that can inspire support of all sorts from the public and, increasingly, funders.

Those within MPS who propose the evolution of their division into an independent college do so in recognition that their existence as a division of L&S is suboptimal in at least several important regards. They give voice to concerns about the advising of undergraduates; they express a desire to have more focused support for their fundraising aspirations. Even before this the Dean had petitioned the FEC of L&S to create a structure that would permit a senate-sanctioned body to focus on the work of MPS, and now that this has happened, a comparable steering committee has been created for HARCS and one for DSS is under consideration.

Even as it is essential that the specifics of the situation of MPS within L&S, and L&S itself, be considered, there is an important value in looking for broader principles of organization to inform ongoing discussions and deliberations. While it might be helpful to describe a vision of what an ideal organizational structure should achieve, it's worth considering that there is likely no single, perfect organizational model. There are legitimate tensions between competing goals.

What, then, should be top of mind when we begin to weigh the potential value of a reorganization? The following principles would apply to a broad range of organization questions, but given the immediate context it makes sense to focus on the issues of college organization.

- *Striking the right balance between central and local control, and locally versus externally provided services.* Support services such as development, communications, technology infrastructure, and basic administrative functions for example, should be optimized to balance the leverage made possible by coordinated common infrastructure, and the need for local customization that reflects unique or specialized needs.

For example, recent efforts to develop common position classifications and metrics for fundraisers through the Office of Development and Alumni Relations demonstrate the value of strong central support while still enabling development staff at the individual unit level to focus on the unique needs of each unit. Similarly, the elevation as a direct report to the Chancellor of the newly created position of Associate Chancellor for Strategic Communications signals a need to more closely coordinate and integrate campus wide strategic messaging into the various communications that each unit develops for its various constituencies. As another example, the campus clearly needs robust information technology infrastructure that affords a strong foundation upon which units can build applications needed to serve their unique teaching and research needs. However, most would agree that proliferation of redundant applications or systems by individual units should generally be discouraged.

This rubric suggests areas for important discussions when it comes to college organization, both in considering what it might mean to break MPS out of L&S or possibly even imagine it evolved into

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three separate colleges? Are there opportunities to continue the sharing of some functions, indeed, for evolving some balance between a center and the peripheries across what would be, in the most extreme model, six colleges? Perhaps it makes sense to develop three parallel and largely independent development operations, especially since there is now (as noted) central coordination and metric establishment at the campus level under the VC-Development. Less clear, for example, is what one might want to develop in the realm of advising, where much advising is still entrusted to the department. If one were to try to frame this question at the most general level, it might run as follows: What is the right balance of central versus locally controlled administrative services that will wisely and prudently leverage campus investment while ensuring that end user needs are appropriately met?

- *Appropriate autonomy without duplication.* College organizations should acknowledge the unique cultures that characterize different disciplines and provide the ability for such cultures to determine appropriate internal support structures that support them. At the same time, organizational boundaries should neither create nor enable establishment of redundant structures.

There are both organizational and more strictly academic examples that could be adduced to illustrate this rubric. The former are the more relevant in the present context. So: are there opportunities to coordinate and possibly even share advising resources across not just departmental but even college boundaries? At the very least what kind of coordination should be fostered across all the colleges and even across all our campus advising structures?

- *Best of "big and small."* Organizational structures should provide our students access to the best facets of attending a major research university while still providing a sense of identity and connection within more manageable communities. Student should be able to freely move within and among colleges in exploring all that UC Davis offers; courses of interest should be available and student should be able to enroll in courses outside their immediate majors, research opportunities should be easily accessible, and access to the campus' public service opportunities should not be constrained by virtue of college organizational boundaries.

Students should at the same time feel a sense of connectedness to the college within which their major is located. They should have opportunities to forge relationships with fellow students, faculty and staff and have unfettered access to advising and other support resources. In short, the size and complexity of UC Davis should ideally be made as close to invisible to students as possible. We should aspire to provide a "small school" experience in terms of access to resources that support student success.

For examples, the residential colleges at UC San Diego and UC Santa Cruz provide smaller sub-communities within a larger research university environment. At UCLA, more than 100 of the 127

undergraduate majors are housed within four divisions of College of Letters and Sciences². As with the previous topics, the number and makeup of UC Davis Colleges are a result of historical and local conditions and traditions. Still, the question should be considered: how might different college organizational models improve the quality of student experiences? What metrics should be used to assess such models?

Readers may find it peculiar, even disingenuous, that so far the issue of resources, of “saving money” has not been mentioned. It is important to reiterate that the impulse behind current consideration for a change in college organization, more broadly, the right sizing, shaping and aligning of college units, is not primarily about saving money through efficiency, although of course prudent management of scarce resources should always be a significant factor in our thinking. What we must keep uppermost in mind is the question of how we might best organize our operations to be responsive to the needs of all users: students, faculty, staff, patients, and friends of the Davis campus. We should bear in mind that our operations are not run for the sake of those who run them but rather in service to end users. Every organization should periodically reassess whether its organization can more effectively serve the needs of its members and not just in times of budgetary constraint.

² http://www.admissions.ucla.edu/prospect/coll_sch.htm