

## Massive Virtual Fires Engulf San José State University

California Faculty Association – San José State University, Executive Board

Last week, California experienced record-high temperatures around the State, prompting the California Fire Department to announce an early start of the “fire season.” San José was no different. The news fires that sprung up at San José State University (SJSU) called for immediate address by the faculty. Particularly, two articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Learning from Big Business,” and *The New York Times*, “Colleges Adapt Online Courses to Ease Burden,” highlighted our campus president, Mohammad Qayoumi’s, opinion about online education, traditional pedagogy, and his vision of the California State University system. A third article by the entire SJSU philosophy department “Why Professors at San Jose State Won't Use a Harvard Professor's MOOC,” clearly demonstrates faculty concern – about massive open online courses (MOOCs). Finally, Associated Student Senator Leo Postovoit’s opinion published in the *Spartan Daily* “Just Add Coffee: Our University is not Walmart” challenges the business model of the university put forth by President Qayoumi stating that the educational experience at SJSU is not just a “shopping cart” or “e-commerce site.”

The California Faculty Association (CFA), representing 2,059 faculty at San José State University and more than 23,000 faculty statewide, also has serious concerns about President Qayoumi’s comments and vision. To be clear, CFA has long supported the classroom and technology innovations by faculty at CSU. Moreover, CFA has also pushed for more resources and training to enable the faculty to explore new pedagogies and new technological tools. The faculty association is alarmed by the expressed preference of President Qayoumi for private rather than public solutions for the CSU. Moreover, what consultation and meetings have occurred with the faculty run counter to his comments in the press, which celebrate private enterprise at the expense of the University and its collegial form of government. Walmart and other private firms have a command and control authority structure and resulting inflated executive salaries. This is the antithesis of public service and more specifically of university governance, and raises for CFAs questions about the stated commitments to shared governance. Does SJSU really want to be known as Wal-Mart U?

It is clear that President Qayoumi is committed to expanding the partnership between Udacity and edX, regardless of any assessment outcome and what it may inform us about online education or course materials provided by third parties, in the case of edX. This directly contradicts previous statements that he and the Provost have made to the faculty about how these “pilot programs” are to proceed. The Math Department is concerned about decisions being made regarding the online courses developed by Udacity, without adequately consulting with the department. In particular, a decision was made to limit the hours of proctored exams (for financial reasons) that violated a long standing Math Department policy that any online math course must have at least two proctored midterms and one proctored final. The department also has concerns about the passing rates in the Udacity online classes, which so far seem to be noticeably lower than the passing rates for a typical in-person math

class. However, the Math Department continues to experiment with online math courses and hopes that these issues can be resolved.

A few weeks ago, the President's comments to CFA and to the press seemed to be ignorant of faculty and their pedagogy. He indicated that traditional classroom teaching, particularly in an electrical engineering course, was inefficient and ineffective—quoting a 55 percent pass rate. While Anant Agarwal of edX and Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom describe a stereotype of classroom teaching based on some hackneyed Hollywood script of a teacher writing on a blackboard while his students sleep in boredom, President Qayoumi does not counter with examples of the exemplary and innovative teaching that is practiced at SJSU. Therefore, we invite him to visit SJSU classes (or perhaps even teach a course) so that he might be able to more accurately represent the real work of professors and instructors at SJSU. The anecdotal accounts of the 91 percent pass rate in the edX engineering course could point to several aspects of the social process of teaching. For example, the professor and the students have openly stated that they are spending considerably more time on this version of the course compared with the traditional face-to-face version. Logically, when one spends more time preparing for a course, results are likely to improve. The pedagogical infrastructure and work that has gone into the preparation of the edX material could easily be replicated if SJSU made a commitment to pedagogy and made training in pedagogy central to all faculty. How much of the difference in outcomes is the result of attention to pedagogy?

Additionally, little is known about whether online pedagogy makes education more accessible. In many reports, online education simply increases the “digital divide.” Successes in MOOCs have been reported to be due to the resources available to those who enroll. Those who do well academically and are better prepared, know the material better, and have the time to review materials repeatedly are more likely to succeed. Technology companies are aware of the digital divide and Udacity officials have informed CFA that they are addressing the issue, but reports suggest that the divide continues to widen at an outrageous pace, making education increasingly inaccessible. Furthermore, online education has yet to demonstrate if a student is more employable. Are companies willing to hire the graduate of a program whose courses are online? Is a student who possesses the resources to attend in-person programs versus online programs more marketable?

In an environment where faculty are constantly reminded that fewer resources for public universities are available, CFA is disturbed that President Qayoumi is not actively lobbying Sacramento and Silicon Valley venture capitalists for more public funding of education. The people with whom he associates, members of the Silicon Valley elite, are the very people who have succeeded in privatizing the wealth generated by our society and making the rules that reduce their tax obligations to California. The partnerships with Udacity and edX will put more tax dollars into the pockets of the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and at the expense of the State's taxpayers.

Finally, over the last several years, SJSU has made large investments in the understanding of student retention and success. This effort includes the building of more on-campus housing

and expanding the campus' Student Union. The argument for such efforts, which the CFA supports, stems from evidence showing that by creating more campus community, student success increases. Additionally, in Academic-Year 2011-12, Jeff Davis and Vincent Tinto, presented their research on working-class and first-generation students whose learning needs are distinct and require careful attention. They were brought to our campus to help us improve retention and persistence of our students, for whom the social processes associated with learning are central to their success. Additional research by Shana Smith Jagers of Teachers College, Columbia University shows that while some students favor online education for various reasons, there is a "strong underlying pattern: Most students [do] not feel they learn the course material as well when they took it online." Jagers found that students felt that this was not only due to reduced teacher interaction, but also weaker student-student interaction. For first-generation and at-risk students, this is significant. Thus, the move to push remedial courses and introductory courses online, directly contradicts this research and the public investment in education.

San José State University is the public university of Silicon Valley. It is the engine that drives the region and its technology. As an institution of higher education, it is one piece in the larger Master Plan for Higher Education—and it is an essential higher education institution that works in collaboration with local community colleges to educate the next generation of Californians. President Qayoumi speaks of innovation, but wants to move fast—"We want to fail fast, learn from it, and move on." Is it worth it to fail in course delivery systems that do not have the full support of the faculty—whose role is to provide governance and curriculum to the students of the university?

The California Faculty Association urges President Qayoumi to collaborate with the faculty, its union, the SJSU Academic Senate and the students of San José State University. CFA is not against online education. Our mission is to protect the rights of our faculty and to ensure quality education for the students of the CSU system. CFA also urges the public to write letters to the CSU Chancellor, SJSU President Qayoumi, and elected officials expressing concerns and questions regarding online education and massive open online classes, and the use of private companies for public education. We believe that access to higher education is central to a stronger economy, region, and state, and we believe that public support and funding is the key to its success.

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