To: UCDC Academic Advisory Council (AAC)
Re: Update on the UCDC Core Seminar Curriculum

Fall 2011 represents the latest data we have measuring student satisfaction with the Core Seminar Curriculum. In January of 2011 we shared our Preliminary Assessment of the Revisions to the UCDC Core Curriculum. Table 1 compares student assessment data between Fall 2010 and Fall 2011. This data helps us evaluate whether or not the changes we have made have succeeded in improving a curriculum that was already highly rated by students. The data shows that the Core Seminar Curriculum has continued to improve in response to the changes we instituted last year. These changes include:

- limit class time and maximize more one-on-one or small-group interaction with the professor. However, it is also important to minimize instructor burnout when balancing individual vs. class-time attention to students
- experiment with implementing more structured exercises in class
- ongoing meeting of faculty to discuss issues and share solutions
- more structured instructional sheets that help students understand the higher expectations involved in independent project work

One aspect that creates the ability for continuous improvement is a stable core faculty. We now have a group of seasoned Core Seminar teachers who understand how to deal with the issues that are unique to these classes, namely:

- the mixture of disciplines from the humanities to the social sciences to the hard sciences
- the difference in experience with researching a writing a major research paper

It is important to note the strong rise in the average rating of students who believe the course is worthwhile. At the beginning of the assessment process, we interviewed focus groups of UCDC alumni who argued that the seminars were marginal to their experience. We believe that this data shows we have made the seminars a more central part of their internship experience, at least for a larger number of students.
Core Seminars
Was prepared and organized
Was concerned about student learning
Used class time effectively
Was clear and Understandable
Exhibited enthusiasm for subject and teaching
Respected students, was sensitive to and concerned with their progress
Students felt welcome in seeking help in or outside of class
Was fair in evaluating students
Was effective as an teacher overall
Availability of other faculty

2011
Themed 2011
4.8 4.9 4.7 4.6 5.0 4.9 4.9 4.9 4.9 4.8
Unthemed 2011
4.1 4.5 3.1 3.8 4.3 4.5 4.6 4.4 3.9 4.7
Overall
4.5 4.7 3.9 4.2 4.6 4.7 4.7 4.4 4.4 4.7

2010
Themed
4.2 4.4 4 4.4 4.6 4.6 4.7 4.5 4.4 4.3
Unthemed
3.7 4.2 3.2 3.8 4.0 4.2 4.5 4.1 3.7 4.1
Overall
4.0 4.3 3.6 4.1 4.3 4.4 4.6 4.3 4.1 4.2

Core Seminars
the syllabus clearly explained the structure of the course
The examinations reflected the materials covered during the course
The required readings contributed to my learning
Assignments contributed to my learning
Guest lecturers contributed to my learning
Supplementary materials were informative
Field trips contributed to my learning
Course overall was a valuable learning experience

2011
Themed
4.5 4.6 4.5 4.7 4.6 4.6 4.6 4.9
Unthemed
4.4 4.5 3.0 4.0 4.6 4.1 4.9 3.9
Overall
4.4 4.5 3.8 4.4 4.6 4.3 4.7 4.4

2010
Themed
4.2 4.5 3.6 4.3 4.3 4.2 3.7 4
Unthemed
4.1 3.8 3.2 3.7 4.3 3.2 4.3 3.6
Overall
4.1 4.2 3.4 4.0 4.3 3.7 4.0 3.8
UCDC Core Academic Program Assessment

E. Melanie DuPuis
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UC Santa Cruz
Associate Academic Director
UC Washington Center

7/10/2011
Summary

For most campuses (except Irvine and Riverside), the core of the UCDC academic program is a research seminar that culminates in a substantial research paper. The UCDC Executive Director made substantial changes to the UCDC core academic program this year. The most significant change was the development of themed research seminars. This report assesses the effect of these changes over the past year in order to whether both core and themed seminar choices are working well. The results indicate a positive response to the changes, while indicating some possible improvements that could be made to both themed and unthemed seminars. This report will describe the curricular innovations that were made and the students’ responses to them in the three quarters in which they were implemented this year.

This overall program assessment represents a substantial landmark in the way UCDC collects data on its program, including its academic program. Curricular changes were part of a larger integration of instruction and management of all campuses into one program. Previously, each campus evaluated its program with its own instrument. The data reported here represents an entirely new type of program data: it is a single instrument that provides a year’s worth of information on the campus academic program as a whole. The data reported here therefore represents the first time the UCDC administration has had available for analysis consistent data about the program and the curriculum over an entire academic year. This particular report will focus only on the core research seminars, both themed and unthemed. The assessment of electives is beyond the scope of this paper.

Background

Prior to the consolidation, each campus was responsible for developing a credited core seminar for its UCDC students and for providing professors from either the home campus or the DC area to teach electives. All but two of the campuses chose nonthemed research seminars in which students received some social science methods training and guidance in their research on topics of their choosing. The AAC suggested that more could be done to integrate the core seminars with the internship. That seminal idea led to the development of the themed research seminar: classes that integrated the research project and classroom teaching more closely with the student internships. This also meant that most students would have choices over core seminars (unthemed research, themed research and -- for two campuses only -- Washington Focus Seminar). In addition, the Executive Director was given complete control over the electives for the first time.

The consolidation put a Governing Committee that reports to the COVC in charge of UCDC but gave the Executive Director the discretion to retain advisory committees. He decided to retain the AAC so that they could continue their excellent work advising on curricular and recruitment matters. His vision is that the Center’s academic staff will experiment with innovative curriculum and will engage in regular assessments for discussion in the AAC. The goal is to be on the cutting edge of experiential education.
This is the first of what we hope will be a series of assessment reports as the faculty continue to innovate in core research seminar curricular design. To ensure some critical distance, the initial assessment was given to Professor DuPuis because of her previous experience in curriculum assessment and the advantage that she had coming at the matter with fresh eyes. Professor DuPuis evaluated the program changes in three ways: first, in the fall she carried out a series of focus groups with alumni from the UCDC Program, to get their input on the curriculum as they had experienced it in the past. Second, she designed a new student course assessment instrument. Finally, she discussed the results with other core research seminar faculty members both individually and in periodic meetings of the Curriculum Committee, which she chairs. The first section will briefly summarize the findings from the focus groups. The next section of the report will analyze the data collected from the student course evaluations. The final section will discuss various ways in which the faculty have worked together to revise the themed and unthemed research courses in response to both data collected through these assessments and their own experiences in teaching these courses as revised.

Alumni focus groups

Professor DuPuis interviewed alumni in focus groups in order to gain information about attitudes toward previous versions of the research seminars. Through these interviews, she found that focus group alumni were generally critical of the academic element of the program in general and the core courses in particular. Of the 13 focus group members, two quite strongly argued that courses, and core research seminars in particular, should be optional. Yet, this was a minority opinion; seven focus group members disagreed with the idea of making the core courses optional. Nonetheless, most focus group members agreed that the internship, and not the academic component of the UCDC Program, was the most important part of their learning experience at UCDC. The vast majority of focus group members agreed that the combination of internship work and coursework was extremely difficult and that one or the other tended to suffer because students were forced to make tradeoffs in terms of focus due to lack of time.

Focus group alumni also did not make a strong connection between their professional skills and their academic experience in the UCDC Program. Despite very pointed questioning, focus group alumni saw their UCDC academic experience as unrelated to their professional success in Washington. Even those who were in favor of coursework during the internship saw this work as contributing to their academic degree, and perhaps providing a writing sample for their applications to graduate programs. It may be that UCDC alumni who are currently in Washington and who generally moved into professional positions shortly after their internships came to the Program with stronger research and writing skills and therefore did not feel that the program had much to do with obtaining these skills. On the other hand, alumni who came to the program with fewer of these skills may not have been represented in our focus groups, but may have left the program feeling that the research seminar gave them more skills.
Nevertheless, focus group alumni expressed some skepticism about adding professional training to the research seminar. In their responses, they tended to be skeptical that a 10-week research seminar could accomplish both academic and professional training. Many of the alumni in the focus groups argued that a separate, short course (perhaps a two-credit seminar) would make more sense. Some argued that this type of training is better learned on the job, while others thought it would be valuable to learn in the Washington Program, but that it shouldn’t take the place of the academic training. Trying to do both, most focus group alumni argued, would be too much for a one-quarter, 5-unit class (or one semester, 10 unit class).

The focus groups also made it clear that some students come to the UC Washington Program with an interest in maintaining their academic trajectory while others want to mostly immerse themselves in their internship experience. While all agreed that the internship was the most important aspect of their UCDC experience, many of the alumni saw the academic offerings as important in terms of their advancement toward graduation.

These interviews complimented faculty discussion in the UCDC Curriculum Committee about the nature of students in the program: there are many different kinds of students who come to UCDC but the major split is between those who want to do academic work during the quarter and those who do not. Those who do not, as indicated by some alumni who argued against academic requirements during the program, are very strongly of the opinion that UCDC should not have an academic component in terms of required courses.

The Revised Core Seminar Curriculum

Alumni focus group responses illuminate some of the challenges we faced this year in the design of a new curriculum. Despite alumni skepticism, we wanted to try bringing some professionalization into the core courses. We made these changes in part to increase the academic engagement of students who are more interested in a professional experience. Also, a number of the core curriculum professors have worked as professionals in government, journalistic and non-profit organizations. We believed that we could impart some real-life professional skills and were anxious to try this out.

However, we also sought to meet the standards that the AAC set for the crediting of a core seminar course, namely the 20-25 page writing requirement and the requirement that the student do some original research. We wanted to meet both the standards for research writing and add some professional skills training. However, we also wanted to continue to serve those students who wanted a more conventional academic research seminar experience. We therefore chose to offer two different kinds of core courses: (1) the conventional general research seminar in which students pick their own topics and professors concentrate on teaching students how to write a research paper and (2) several themed seminars which fit in with a student’s internship or professional interest. The themed seminars educated students in a particular topic, provided some professional skills training, involved some original research and met the 20-25 pages writing requirement.
We also acknowledge, however, that all students, whether or not they have academic goals during the UCDC quarter/semester, see the main focus of their experience to be the internship itself. Student satisfaction with their internship is extraordinarily high, with over 90% reporting in our fall assessment that they would recommend their internship to others and that it contributed to their professional development. This is a testament to the quality of staff in helping students with their placements into high-quality internships that provide an excellent internship experience.

Student Assessment

The year of data we have collected on student satisfaction with the general and themed seminars allows us to evaluate these curriculum changes. The overall data, as displayed in Tables 1 and 2, indicates that the decision to change the structure of the research seminars was a good one. The student assessment indicated that satisfaction with individual classes varies with instructor. However, overall student satisfaction with the research core classes as a learning experience was high, scoring from 3.4 to 4.7 on a 1-5 scale (Table 1).

Table 1: Student Assessment of Core Seminar Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Was prepared and organized</td>
<td>Was fair in evaluating students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALL</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WINTER</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRING</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEMESTER</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The greatest dissatisfaction with research core classes, echoing the alumni focus groups, is the interruption in the main focus of their UCDC experience, the internship itself. Students repeatedly mentioned that the both taking classes and working nearly full time at their internships was a problem that affected the quality of their internship work, their academic work, and their own personal health and well-being. One of the most common comments was that they could have written a good paper “if I had another week.” This was particularly true of the quarter students. Because core seminar classes affect GPAs, the anxiety over academic work quality given the time constraints is consistently high. This is particularly true for UC Berkeley students, who receive 11 credits for the core research class. Most other campuses give 4-5 credits for this class and offer field study credits for their internships. Berkeley (representing most of the semester students in Table 1) does not offer any credit for internship work but only credit for the work done in class.
Assessment of Change to Themed and Unthemed Research Seminars

As noted above, the UCDC Program attracts both students seeking a professionalization learning experience and those seeking to continue their academic work. The bifurcation of courses into more academic unthemed and more professionalization/applied themed courses means that The Program is meeting the needs of both types of students. Student satisfaction with the ability to choose between themed and unthemed seminars indicates this fact. Ninety percent of all students approved of this choice in their fall assessments. Over 90% of students sampled in winter and spring courses also approved of this choice.

Table 2: Assessment of Themed and Unthemed Core Seminar Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUARTERS/SEMESTERS</th>
<th>Was prepared and organized</th>
<th>Was concerned about student learning</th>
<th>Used class time effectively</th>
<th>Was clear and Understandable</th>
<th>Exhibited enthusiasm for subject and teaching</th>
<th>Respected students, was sensitive to and concerned with their progress</th>
<th>Students felt welcome in seeking help in or outside of class</th>
<th>Was fair in evaluating students</th>
<th>Was effective as a teacher overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FALL UNTHEMED</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALL THEMED</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WINTER UNTHEMED</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WINTER THEMED</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRING UNTHEMED</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRING THEMED</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRING SEMESTER UNTHEMED</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRING SEMESTER THEMED</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERALL AVERAGE ALL COURSES</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Unthemed courses</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Themed courses</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 2 indicate that students are particularly satisfied with the themed courses. However, students also choose unthemed courses for a number of reasons. First, students often come to UCDC with a research project, such as a senior thesis, in process, that does not fit into the themed courses. Secondly, some students do not have internships that will enable an integration of their work and their academic research. Thirdly, some students simply want to choose a research topic or are working in an internship not covered in a themed seminar. Over and over, students who chose unthemed seminars noted that the themed seminars available “did not match my interests.” Fourthly, some students, especially those pursuing science internships, need a more flexible research class. Finally, some students are simply not interested in the core seminar at all, and therefore choose the unthemed seminar because it seems like the less-structured option. Conversely, other students have never written a research paper and want to learn the basic skills and simply choose the unthemed seminar because it seems like a more-structured option.

It is clear from written comments that students in unthemed research seminars are often strongly committed to choosing their own research topic. Over and over, these comments
state that the best part of the unthemed research seminar was that “it allowed me to develop my own topic.”

In other words, splitting classes between themed and unthemed seminars means that the unthemed seminars now have two types of students: (1) those who come to DC with a strong research background, a well-formed idea or strong desire to form their own research project and a strong interest in academic work and (2) students who are weaker in terms of research and writing skills, as well as, possibly, interest and enthusiasm for academic work. In addition, the unthemed research seminar classes are now more interdisciplinary, forcing instructors to try to talk more different disciplinary “languages” to their students than is necessary in the themed seminars, which tend to attract students from a more narrow set of disciplines. Therefore, the class includes both the super-independently directed and the don’t-fit-anywhere-else students, two groups that do not tend to get along in a classroom. There is a potential for unthemed seminars to therefore become a “garbage can” collecting students that don’t fit into other offerings. In Curriculum Committee discussions, faculty agreed that some interdisciplinarity was worthwhile yet also noted the difficulty of teaching students from both the social and natural sciences.

Needless to say, it is very difficult to teach a class that contains students with such varied expectations, interests, and skills. Students praised the unthemed seminars for “letting us choose and area of focus” yet also complained that these seminars lacked structure. In particular, student comments in unthemed course assessments noted that these classes contain students who are at the very beginning and the very end of their undergraduate education careers as researchers and writers. Students often praised the professor for attempting to teach such a varied group of students, in terms of skill level and discipline, while commenting that expert teaching still did not lead to the most productive learning experience. For example, one student, while having “no problems with the professor” though it was “completely stupid and ridiculous to have a professor try to lead a research seminar for such a broad array of students.”

While we did not ask students to indicate their major in the assessment this year (a question that would probably affect the student’s feeling of anonymity given the range of majors in the class), faculty discussion indicates that science students working in labs have the most problems with the core seminar classes. They tend to take general research seminar classes rather than themed classes and then try to do work associated with their labs. Because we have no natural scientists on staff, social science professors are often unable to lead these students toward a productive research project.

Integration of Internship and Coursework

In the fall assessment, we collected data on student core research course satisfaction with integration of paper topic with their internship. Fall students who answered that they integrated core seminar and internship topics were only slightly more satisfied with the Program overall (4.4 vs. 4.1 score, respectively). In addition, there was little difference
between students who integrated their research paper and internship and those who did not. In other words, preliminary data indicates that student academic satisfaction overall does not differ between those who integrate their internship and academic experience. This would indicate, and focus groups reinforced this indication, that for some students, the ability to work on their own topic, independent of their internship, is important. This, of course, fits with the role of the general research seminar.

Other data on students who do and do not integrate their seminar and internship work is more surprising. In answer to questions as to whether or not the core research seminar helped them to write and think better, those who wrote on their own, non-integrated, topics tended to report little improvement in their skills along these two categories of academic training (54% and 46% respectively). Students who integrated their internship and seminar paper, however, reported much more positively to the idea that the research seminar improved both their thinking and writing (73% and 77%, respectively).

Once again, this indicates that there are different kinds of students in the core research seminars. The students who choose a non-integrated research topic possibly come to the program with more confidence in the (and perhaps even actual) writing and research skills they possess. Curriculum Committee faculty report that many of these students come to the program with a research project, or even a senior thesis, in mind. In contrast, students who feel less confident in their possession of these skills may be more likely to integrate their academic and internship work experience and to recognize the training they receive in the core seminar. In subsequent student assessments, we will further explore these currently admittedly speculative conclusions. The question remains, however, how to best meet the needs of a diversity of students with a diverse set of backgrounds and skills.

(While we collected data about the integration of internship and research paper for both winter and spring, we have not yet had the opportunity to analyze this data.)

Assessment of Inclusion of Professional Training into Themed Courses

Besides organization around a substantial topic, themed courses were designed differently in terms of the inclusion of professional skills training in class (memos, speeches, etc). Students in the themed courses overwhelmingly indicated their appreciation for the professional skills training they received in the themed courses, particularly in terms of professional writing skills. The fact that the Media themed course, which emphasizes journalistic writing training, consistently receives very high reviews indicates the interest of some students in this type of training, and that the themed courses are meeting the interests of these students.

Faculty first designed their themed courses to include both a 20-25 page original research paper and a substantial amount of reading on the substantive topic of the course, plus professionalization instruction. This was, as alumni focus group suspected, too much to handle in one course, especially for quarter students. Faculty discussion indicated that students were doing less of the reading in the themed courses, despite the lighter reading
In our fall assessment, student class evaluations and alumni focus group interviews indicated a number of areas of potential improvement in the UCDC research seminars. We tested two new approaches to deal with the problem of unstructured class time in unthemed seminars: (1) limit class time and maximize more one-on-one or small-group interaction with the professor. However, it is also important to minimize instructor burnout when balancing individual vs. class-time attention to students; (2) experiment with implementing more structured exercises in class. Professors designed more in-class activities to teach research methods in a hands-on way.

On the other hand, our fall assessment of themed seminars indicted some problems that need to be addressed in these classes. Specifically, and as predicted by the focus group alumni, some of the students struggled with the workload of the reading, research and applied writing expectations in the themed courses. The need to do too much in class meant that readings were not always addressed. Therefore, students felt that the readings were either unnecessary or, if they did the readings, they felt that this work was undervalued in the class. Without an exam or short weekly assignments related to the reading, the incentive to come to class prepared is diminished.

Faculty have experimented with various ways to remedy these problems, including more designated time to discuss the readings specifically and a short exam at the end of the course on the readings. Some faculty in themed courses are experimenting with more structured writing assignments that include some original research but are geared to more specific research questions. Some faculty are incorporating more in-class activities to train in professional and research skills. Since much of the general research seminar is spent formulating a research question, more themed seminars are structuring questions and research tasks specifically around the topic at hand. Some faculty are experimenting with several shorter assignments that add up to 20-25 pages of writing. Other faculty are adding final exams or quizzes on the reading.

Table 1 indicates that overall student satisfaction with courses has not changed significantly with these revisions. Student assessment of their overall learning
experience remained about the same throughout the year. However, these data reflect more than curriculum changes. In particular, it is important to note that many of the courses taught this year were first-time courses and that the data may be reflecting those realities rather than enabling a true test of different curricular designs. In general, experienced UCDC faculty scored higher on student assessments, especially in general research seminars. Experienced faculty were also more likely to teach themed seminars, which may account for some of the differences in student assessment. However, the consistency in instructors has enabled incremental improvements in class design not possible when instructors turned over every quarter.

Conclusion

Our assessment and focus group data indicate that dividing the core curricula into themed and unthemed research seminars enables UCDC to meet the needs of a broader group of students. In addition, we have already benefited from the information that is now available through a program-wide assessment of the entire UCDC Program, including the academic program. We will be analyzing the student assessment data more thoroughly in order to understand what course design components are working well and which need to be changed. We also will continue to work on the issue of incompatibility of science students with the general research seminar.

In this iteration of the student assessment, we also evaluated more thoroughly the elective courses. Preliminary data indicates that the availability of electives that meet student interest increases student satisfaction with their academic experience at UCDC. However, we need more time to analyze this data before making any conclusions about the role of electives in student academic experience.

The changes we are implementing in the academic program will, we hope, satisfy academic requirements while giving students more of what they have come to Washington to learn.
Preliminary Assessment of Revisions to the UCDC Core Academic Program: A Working Paper

Melanie DuPuis

Date

1/12/11
Summary

This working paper is a first look at curricular innovations made in the UCDC core academic program this year. The preliminary analysis presented here covers only the first quarter of the new UCDC core academic program. The preliminary data indicate that student assessment of the UCDC Washington Program overall is quite high (4.3 score, Table 1). The data also shows that the curricular innovations made in the core academic program have been mostly positive, but that some challenges remain. This working paper examines both the successes and the continuing challenges of the core academic program and reports on some changes that will be made in the next quarter to further improve the program.

For most campuses (except Irvine and Riverside), the core of the UCDC academic program is a research seminar that culminates in a substantial research paper. The most significant change in the UCDC Program introduced this Fall was the development of three themed research seminars (Congress, Bureaucracy and Media), an idea that has been discussed at length at previous meetings of the UCDC Academic Advisory Committee. The first section of this report will examine the data we have collected to assess these changes. The final section will describe some further alterations we are testing next quarter as we respond to challenges that became clear this quarter. A research team, composed of Melanie DuPuis and Tamara Ball, with advice from the UCDC Curriculum Committee (composed of all instructors in the program), collected data assessing the core academic program in two ways: (1) through focus groups with UCDC alumni who are currently working in government and government-related jobs in the DC area, to determine what they did and did not like about the academic program and (2) through the design and use of a new, program-wide assessment tool to measure student satisfaction and learning in the newly designed version of this program. The report also relies on the input and discussion provided by the UCDC Curriculum Committee, composed of Bruce Cain and Melanie DuPuis along with Jim Desveaux, Amy Bridges, Matt Dallek and Marc Sandalow. The Curriculum Committee put in several hours of hard work on the student assessment design and the analysis of the results, as reported below.

This preliminary assessment is based on the experience with curriculum changes over a single quarter. The information is therefore very tentative. However, the overall program assessment represents a substantial landmark in the way UCDC collects data on its program, including its academic program. Previously, each campus evaluated its program with its own instrument. The data reported here represents an entirely new type of program data: it is a single instrument that reports on the campus program as a whole, including the academic instruction provided. The data reported here therefore represents the first time the UCDC administration has had available for analysis consistent data across campuses about the program and the curriculum.
Background

Prior to the consolidation, each campus was responsible for developing a credited core seminar for its UCDC students and for providing professors from either the home campus or the DC area to teach electives. All but two of the campuses chose nonthemed research seminars in which students received some social science methods training and guidance in their research on topics of their choosing. The AAC suggested that more could be done to integrate the core seminars with the internship. That seminal idea led to the development of the themed research seminar: classes that integrated the research project and classroom teaching more closely with the student internships. This also meant that most students would have choices over core seminars (unthemed research, themed research and Washington Focus for two campuses only). In addition, the Executive Director was given complete control over the electives for the first time.

The consolidation put a Governing Committee that reports to the COVC in charge of UCDC but gave the Executive Director the discretion to retain advisory committees. He decided to retain the AAC so that they can continue their excellent work advising on curricular and recruitment matters. His vision is that the Center’s academic staff will experiment with innovative curriculum and will engage in regular assessments for discussion in the AAC. The goal is to be on the cutting edge of experiential education.

This is the first of what we hope will be a series of assessment reports. To ensure some critical distance, the initial assessment was given to the UCSC team because of their previous experience in curriculum assessment and the advantage that they have coming at the matter with fresh eyes.

Major Themes

The student evaluation of the UCDC Academic Program is overwhelmingly positive. Overall, students’ assessments and alumni focus group conversations indicate that the decision to change the structure of the research seminars was a good one. The change involved bifurcating the research methods courses into (1) conventional unthemed courses that allow for the writing of an academic research paper chosen by the student and (2) themed courses that emphasize the teaching of more professional writing and research skills and which allow students interested in similar subjects to learn together. Because we have no previous program-wide data, we cannot compare student satisfaction and learning in previous research seminars compared to the changed seminars. However, we did receive substantial indication that the seminars, as changed, were received positively. In the program-wide assessment (See Table 3), 84% of students agreed that the program contributed to their academic education and 88% answered that, specifically, the core courses contributed to their intellectual development. Students described the classes as “informative” and “valuable” offering a “great perspective” and “rewarding.”

Alumni focus groups represent attitudes toward previous versions of the research seminars. Focus group alumni did not express as much satisfaction with the academic
element of the program in general or the core courses in particular. Alumni characterized the research seminars with terms like “unstructured” and “arbitrary,” although others found the research paper to be a very valuable part of their UCDC experience. Of the 13 focus group members, two quite strongly argued that courses, and core research seminar courses in particular, should be optional. Yet, this was a minority opinion; seven focus group members disagreed with the idea of making the core courses optional. Overwhelmingly (9 out of 14), focus group members believed that the research seminar should be integrated into the internship and most of those who had this opinion had integrated their internship with their academic research. Many alumni mentioned that the ability to focus on a specific group of ideas and to narrow it down into a research topic enabled them to digest their real work experiences. Nonetheless, most focus group members agreed that the internship, and not the academic component of the UCDC Program, was the most important part of their learning experience at UCDC. Most found that the most positive part of the Program was “being in the political world” and “getting real-world experience.” The research class was “secondary.” While satisfaction with individual classes varied, overall student satisfaction with the research core classes as a learning experience was moderate, scoring an average of 3.8 in a 1-5 scale (Table 1). The next section explores more specific data on student and focus group assessment of the research seminars.

The greatest dissatisfaction with research core classes, expressed in both alumni focus groups and in student assessments, was that they interrupted the main focus of their UCDC experience, the internship itself. Student satisfaction with their internship is extraordinarily high, with over 90% reporting that they would recommend their internship to others and that it contributed to their professional development (Table 3). This is a testament to the quality of staff in helping students with their placements into high-quality internships that provide an excellent internship experience.

Assessment of Change to Themed and Unthemed Research Seminars

The data indicate a positive reaction to separate out seminars into themed and unthemed foci, our first step to meet the diverse needs of the UCDC student body (Tables 2a and 2b). Students and alumni both overwhelmingly support changes that have been made in the program. An overwhelming number of students (94%: Table 3), and all focus group alumni supported these changes. In addition, themed courses also tended to emphasize applied training for professional careers in government or government-related employment while unthemed courses emphasize training in more academic research skills that prepare students for graduate or law school. Since the UCDC Program attracts both kinds of students, this bifurcation of courses into more academic unthemed and more professionalization/applied themed courses means that The Program is meeting the needs of a greater variety of students. Student satisfaction with the ability to choose between themed and unthemed seminars indicates this fact (See Table 3).
Integration of Internship and Coursework

We would expect that this combination of student satisfaction with courses and, especially, internships would indicate that students who integrated internship and coursework would express the greatest satisfaction with the UCDC Program overall. In fact, the preliminary data collected this quarter is inconclusive (Table 4). Students who answered that they integrated core seminar and internship topics were only slightly more satisfied with the Program overall (4.4 vs. 4.1 score, respectively). In addition, there was little difference in the answer to the question as to whether the course contributed to the student’s intellectual development between students who integrated their research paper and internship and those who did not. In other words, preliminary data indicates that student academic satisfaction overall does not differ between those who integrate their internship and academic experience. This would indicate, and focus groups reinforced this indication that, for some students, the ability to work on their own topic, independent of their internship, is important. This, of course, fits with the role of the general research seminar.

Other data on students who do and do not integrate their seminar and internship work is more surprising (Table 4). In answer to questions as to whether or not the core research seminar helped them to write and think better, those who wrote on their own non-integrated topics tended to report little improvement in their skills along these two categories of academic training (54% and 46% respectively). Students who integrated their internship and seminar paper, however, reported much more positively to the idea that the research seminar improved both their thinking and writing (73% and 77%, respectively).

This preliminary data hints at what we suspect, and which Curriculum Committee faculty report, which is that there are different kinds of students in the core research seminars. The students who choose a non-integrated research topic possibly come to the program with more confidence in the (and perhaps with even the actual) writing and research skills they possess. Curriculum Committee faculty report that a certain number of students come to the program with a research project, or even a senior thesis, in mind. In contrast, students who feel less confident in their possession of these skills may be more likely to integrate their academic and internship work experience and to recognize the training they receive in the core seminar. This might also explain the fact that, despite very pointed questioning on our part, focus group alumni made no connection between their academic experience at UCDC and their writing/research/thinking skills. It may be that UCDC alumni who are currently in Washington and who generally moved into professional positions shortly after their internships came to the Program with stronger research and writing skills and therefore did not feel that the program had much to do with obtaining these skills. On the other hand, alumni who came to the program with fewer of these skills may not have been represented in our focus groups, but may have left the program feeling that the research seminar gave them more skills. In subsequent student assessments, we will further explore these currently admittedly speculative conclusions. The question remains, however, how to best meet the needs of a diversity of students with a diverse set of backgrounds and skills.
Student assessment data covering only one iteration of these curricular changes are inadequate to make more substantial conclusions about the changes in the UCDC academic program. This preliminary assessment does, however, provide some substantial information relaying the positive response to the changes made, as well as informs instructors about some changes that could be made to increase students’ satisfaction and learning in the UCDC academic program. The rest of the report will provide data on the responses that indicated both satisfaction with the program and ways that UCDC instruction could improve both student satisfaction and learning.

Assessment of Inclusion of Professional Training into Themed Courses

Besides organization around a substantial topic, themed courses were designed differently in terms of the inclusion of professional skills training in class (memos, speeches, etc). Students in the themed courses overwhelmingly indicated their appreciation for the professional skills training they received in the themed courses, particularly in terms of professional writing skills. The fact that the Media themed course, which emphasizes journalistic writing training, received very high reviews in particular indicates the interest of some students in this type of training, and that the themed courses are meeting the interests of these students.

Focus group alumni response to adding professional training to the research seminar was more mixed. In fact, focus group alumni tended to be skeptical that a research seminar could do both academic and professional writing training. Many of the alumni in the focus groups argued that a separate, short course (perhaps a two-credit seminar) would make more sense. Some argued that this type of training is better learned on the job, while others thought it would be valuable to learn in the Washington Program, but that it shouldn’t take the place of the academic training. Trying to do both, most focus group alumni argued, would be too much for a one-quarter, 5-unit class.

The comments by both students and focus group alumni on career training indicate that students see a strong need for this type of professional training. Students who did research and writing as part of their internship generally acknowledged that the core class helped them gain valuable skills. Students in both the themed and unthemed seminars answered positively to questions about how to courses contributed to both their intellectual and political understanding (Table 3) and their overall learning experience (Table 2b.) Alumni focused specifically on how the Washington Program could improve career night and other networking opportunities with DC professionals. Alumni interviewed were very dedicated to UCDC and expressed strong interest in becoming more involved with The UC Washington Center in terms of networking with students and providing other kinds of support for programs.

Challenges and Beta-Testing of New Approaches
Student assessments and alumni focus group interviews indicated a number of areas of potential improvement in the UCDC research seminars. Both students and alumni tended to be critical of how professors structured class-time in the unthemed seminars (rated 3.2) vs. themed seminars (rated 4). (See Table 2a.) The Curriculum Committee discussed this difference in rating at length. All members of the committee recognized that teaching an unthemed research seminar is more challenging in terms of how to structure class time. Lectures and discussion of research method details are significantly less attractive than classes that cover substantive political issues and “Washington Buzz.” In addition, splitting classes between themed and unthemed seminars means that the unthemed seminars now have two types of students: (1) those who come to DC with a strong research background and a well-formed idea of their research project and (2) students who are weaker in terms of research and writing skills, as well as, possibly, interest and enthusiasm for academic work. In addition, the unthemed research seminar classes are now more interdisciplinary, forcing instructors to try to talk more different disciplinary “languages” to their students than is necessary in the themed seminars, which tend to attract students from a more narrow set of disciplines. For example, DuPuis’ unthemed seminar class this quarter contains students from a broad spectrum covering everything from cultural studies to neurobiology. Therefore, the class includes both the super-independently directed and the don’t-fit-anywhere-else students, two groups that do not tend to get along in a classroom. There is a potential for unthemed seminars to therefore become a “garbage can,” collecting students that don’t fit into other offerings.

How to increase the engagement of the self-motivated, the less engaged, and the less research skilled students during unthemed seminar class-time is an issue we will be working on for the rest of the year. We are currently beta-testing two new approaches: (1) limit class time and maximize more one-on-one or small-group interaction with the professor. However, it is also important to minimize instructor burnout when balancing individual vs. class-time attention to students; (2) experiment with implementing more structured exercises in class. DuPuis will be adapting exercises from her NSF-supported sustainability curriculum labs that train students in project design (http://seed.soe.ucsc.edu/See SOCY115 and EE80s labs.). These labs have been well tested over several iterations and some can be adapted to more broad policy context issues.

On the other hand, while the themed seminars received higher assessment scores than the unthemed seminars, scores also indicted some problems that need to be addressed. Specifically, and as predicted by the focus group alumni, some of the students in the themed seminars struggled with the workload of the reading, research and applied writing expectations in these courses. The need to do too much in class meant that readings were not always addressed. Therefore, students felt that the readings were either unnecessary or, if they did the readings, they felt that this work was undervalued in the class (Table 2b). Without an exam or short weekly assignments related to the reading, the incentive to come to class prepared is diminished. We will be experimenting with various ways to remedy this, including more designated time to discuss the readings specifically and a short exam at the end of the course on the readings. Campuses might consider adjusting the minimum page requirements to allow for applied writing and exam work.
Conclusion

Our assessment and focus group data indicate that the changes made so far in the research seminar curriculum is an improvement over previous class designs. In particular, what we hope to find in the next quarters is that the consistency in instructors will enable incremental improvements in class design not possible when many instructors came and taught at UCDC for only one quarter. In addition, we have already benefited from the information that is now available through a program-wide assessment of the entire UCDC Program, including the academic program.

For our next steps, we will test out the new approaches described above and also redesign the student assessment to collect more accurate and useful data. This will help us understand more thoroughly the challenges listed above, particularly to understand the different types of UCDC students and their academic needs.

In the next iteration of the student assessment, we will evaluate more thoroughly the elective courses as well. Preliminary data indicates that the availability of electives that meet student interest increases student satisfaction with their academic experience at UCDC. However, we need to collect and examine data on this topic more rigorously before making any conclusions about the role of electives in student academic experience.

One result of this assessment came out loud and clear: students are extremely happy with the internship program overall. Students scored their satisfaction with their internship at an incredible 4.5, with very few scores under 4. (See Table 1b.) Also, an overwhelming 88% of students reported that the internship experience helped them to clarify their career goals. (See Table 2.) Focus group alumni interviews indicated that many students come to the program not particularly interested in the academic components of their quarter/semester. The changes we are implementing in the academic program will, we hope, satisfy academic requirements while giving students more of what they have come to Washington to learn.