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**UC Tech Awards 2023 Candidate**

**Category:** OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE  
**Name:** The UC Merced Academic Activity Team  
**Number of people:** (10)  
**Location:** UC Merced

1. **Person submitting the application/nomination**
   1. **Name, title, department, location/organization, and please indicate if you are faculty or staff:** Christy Snyder, Assistant Vice Chancellor and Deputy Chief Information Officer, UC Merced Office of Information Technology (staff)
   2. **Email address:** [csnyder4@ucmerced.edu](mailto:csnyder4@ucmerced.edu)
   3. **The name of your organization:** UC Merced
2. **Award category** Operational Excellence
3. **Name of person, name of the team, or name of the project to receive the award**   
   The UC Merced Academic Activity Team

**All project team members - if applicable** (Name, title, department, location/organization, and please indicate if they are faculty or staff, along with their email address(s).

Avi Badwal, Director of Enterprise Technologies  
Seema Ahuja, Cloud Environment Manager, Office of Information Technology  
Jay Belhumer, Student Information System Programmer Analyst, Office of Information Technology  
Suzat Karim, Integration and Architect Manager, Office of Information Technology  
Ashu Guru, Applications Programmer for Digital Business Service, Office of Information Technology  
Austin Leonardo, Integration Developer, Office of Information Technology  
Erin Webb, University Registrar  
Ron Radney, Director of Financial Aid and Fellowships  
Heather Nardello, Deputy Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships  
Rachel Bellofatto, Director of Academic and Emerging Technology

1. **Which location was affected by the work?** UC Merced
2. **Summary**   
   In 2020/21, UC Merced embarked on a project to reimagine their Academic Activity solution, a problematic process with huge financial and resource management impact for the campus. The project team worked quickly to create a user-friendly UI that is deeply integrated with Banner (SIS) and Canvas (LMS) to significantly minimize the operational burden of governmental regulations to faculty, staff, and students.
3. **Narrative**

Academic Activity: Beyond Excel and E-mail

In 2019/2020, new federal requirements for financial aid [[34 CFR 690.80(b)(2)(ii),](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=feb836c9af1f97ca31524e9110d68e82&mc=true&node=se34.4.690_180&rgn=div8) [34 C.F.R. § 668.2l(c)](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=9d76f358f6f6905317cc254b1d9622be&mc=true&node=se34.3.668_121&rgn=div8): and 34 C.F.R. § 668.22 (7) (i)] necessitated a unique solution to reliably and efficiently track and provide verification of students' academic engagement in each course before the add/drop deadline each term.

In addition to these new (at the time) requirements, UC Merced is required by federal regulations to recalculate financial aid after the add/drop deadline for all undergraduate and graduate aid recipients based on their enrollment status in the classes which we can confirm they began attending. If we were unable to document the student's academic activity in a class, we would be required to adjust student aid to exclude the units for that class. Students had an opportunity to appeal if they had supporting documentation from the instructor confirming their attendance, but ultimately, if not addressed, the cost to the organization and students could be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

To ensure compliance with these standards, UC Merced created a cross-functional group including faculty members and representatives from the registrar's office, Financial Aid office, and Office of Information Technology to think about ways to address these new regulations and related audit findings. Based on the initial discussion, the group prototyped a manual email- and Excel-based solution which addressed the requirements of the issue, but significantly increased faculty and staff workload to a point that was virtually impossible to manage. Given that more than 90% of all students at UC Merced receive financial aid, a more permanent and sustainable solution was necessary.   
  
In late 2020, Avi Badwal, Director of Enterprise Technologies, joined the team to better understand the unique challenges and constraints of the project. After several meetings with key stakeholders, it became apparent that the process would need to start with the people most impacted by the new regulations and process in order to get to a completely new, purpose-built solution to suit their needs.

Over the course of 12 months, the Information Technology team rapidly prototyped a series of new features including deep integration into Canvas (LMS) to harvest engagement in specific course(s) along with an expanded user interface (UI) to allow faculty and staff to quickly and effectively fulfill their responsibilities. Faculty are responsible for certifying at least one instance of academic activity for each student enrolled in their section by the add/drop deadline each term, or their students' financial aid could be adjusted to exclude the units for that class. A designated staff member may also certify students' academic activity on behalf of a faculty member.

The team used design and business process optimization techniques to create and deliver an accessible, easy-to-use interface that allowed faculty to certify and/or address a wide range of issues regarding their students' academic activity in Fall 2021. The new academic activity UI for faculty includes the ability to view all students enrolled in each term and section and quickly record one or more instances of activity for each student by selecting from a pre-populated list. In addition to certifying activity, faculty can also more easily manage activity-related actions such as dropping a student from the class, recording the date of a student's last attendance, adding attachments, and saving, editing, or deleting records as needed to stay up to date.

For students, the design and business process focused on quick visibility into academic activity instances recorded by faculty and/or staff for each course. The UI we built into our Canvas (LMS) instance and Banner (SIS) displays the total number of course activities recorded per term, with a link to view more details. When academic activity is missing and could result in an adjustment of students' financial aid, a prominent notification appears to alert the student so they can learn more. From there, a student can easily take action to file an appeal and provide their own supporting evidence of academic activity for the course. 

As a younger campus with ambitious enrollment goals, UC Merced can't afford to perpetuate unsustainable processes that ultimately threaten student enrollment—even those developed quickly to address the most critical of problems. The new Academic Activity interface significantly reduces the faculty and staff time to complete these necessary tasks and makes the process sustainable as enrollment grows.

The team’s strategy—to start from scratch with a new application that included deep integration and user-friendly UI in Banner and Canvas enabled UC Merced to quickly integrate and facilitate compliance with new requirements for financial aid from the federal government and, at the same time, minimize the operational burden to faculty, staff, and students.   
  
See screen Shots and a walkthrough of the new process: <https://academicactivity.ucmerced.edu/information-faculty>