

Academic Participation at UC Davis

Larry L. Sautter Award for Innovation in Information Technology – 2019

SUBMITTED BY:

DAN RANSOM; ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, IT – UC DAVIS

DJRANSOM@UCDAVIS.EDU; 530-752-6063

Summary Statement

Capturing the start of academic activity through a web application allows UC Davis to adhere to the Department of Education’s “attendance gathering” requirements without adding to faculty workload.

Project Team

Project Position	Name	Title	Department
Project Manager	Dan Ransom	Associate Director, IT	Financial Aid & Scholarships
Executive Committee	Deborah Agee	Director	Financial Aid & Scholarships
Executive Committee	Erin Crom	Registrar	Office of the University Registrar
Executive Committee	Edwin Arevalo	Executive Director	Academic Senate
Executive Committee	Donald Dudley	Director	Student Support & Judicial Affairs
Compliance Manager	Bronwyn Garrison	Assistant Director, Compliance and Programs	Financial Aid & Scholarships
Technical Manager	Brad Harding	Interim Director	Enterprise Student Applications
Faculty and Senate Liaison	Theresa Costa	Policy Analyst	Academic Senate
Developer	Matt Johnson	Programmer	Enterprise Student Applications
Developer	Andy Richmond	Application Programmer	Financial Aid & Scholarships
Developer	Chris Loza	Application Programmer	Financial Aid & Scholarships
QA Lead	Marina Sterner	Application Quality Specialist	Financial Aid & Scholarships

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Impact:

- 100% of the student population
- Model for all UC campuses to emulate

Timeline and Risk:

- 1 year deadline
- Fines from the Dept of Education of \$350,000+ each

Project Costs:

- < \$500 for marketing materials
- 60+ hours of IT development
- 120+ hours of PM

Project Team:

- 12 staff across 6 departments
- 18+ departments for communication support

Success:

- 98.8% participation
- 99.99% kept financial aid

Project Summary:

As the result of a finding during a Federal review by the Department of Education, UC Davis (an institution not required to take attendance) was instructed to confirm the start of academic activity for all students receiving federal financial aid. UC Davis was at risk of being levied a fine by the Department of Education for failure to comply. Other large universities have seen fines as high as \$350,000. Over the course of the next year, the project team worked very closely with campus partners to design and implement a first-of-its-kind mechanism to accomplish this goal without requiring expensive new technology, imposing a burden on faculty, or requiring significant effort from students. The result was an unmitigated success with more than 98.8% of the full student population accounted for and all but a mere handful of financial aid recipients establishing eligibility for federal aid.

Narrative:

The University of California, Davis (UC Davis) implemented an Academic Participation online application where all students have the opportunity to complete an academic activity for each course they are enrolled in. Supplementing this data is information drawn from the campus learning management system. By documenting academic participation and returning applicable Title IV funds in a timely manner, UC Davis complies with federal regulations. To respond to campus concerns about academic misconduct and to help promote the [UC Davis' Principles of Community](#) the initiative includes student acknowledgement of the campus [Code of Academic Conduct](#).

The Issue

After discussions with federal auditors, UC Davis was allowed approximately one year to implement a solution that captured the start of academic activity for students receiving federal financial aid. Any solution would need to fall within the formal definition of academic activity and could not be based solely on student registration. Also, the information had to be collected prior to the census date rather than waiting until after final grades (as had been the previous process).

As an institution, UC Davis, established additional project parameters:

- It would not be appropriate to ask **only** financial aid recipients to be a part of the new program. Not only could this be stigmatizing but it would be impractical as students could apply for aid very late in the term and would still need to be accounted.
- Technical resources outside of the financial aid team, including the Student Information System development team, was extremely limited due to ongoing projects.
- Discussions with faculty demonstrated their strong belief in academic freedom and general opposition to mandated attendance taking activities during instructional.
- As with any public University, financial resources were at a premium and any solution would need to be accomplished internally using only existing platforms and tools.
- As an institution, UC Davis would require strong executive support if there would be any expectation of a successful and quick implementation of a campus-wide initiative.

The Solution

The project team spent a great deal of time researching and discussing possible solutions including those used by other institutions. Discussions and debate were extensive but eventually the team settled upon a solution that was acceptable to faculty, students, staff, the University leadership, and federal regulators. This innovative solution would consist of the following:

- Addition of a new web form to the existing student portal (MyUCDavis) to allow students to acknowledge the beginning of academic activity for each registered course. This tool would be called **Academic Participation**.
- Presentation of the Code of Academic Conduct to students, who would be asked to read and acknowledge it, in order to best support the goals of the University leadership and Academic Senate.
- Development of a comprehensive communication plan to educate students, staff, and faculty about the new requirements. This would include setting up [an informational website](#) with details on the program.
- Distribution of email reminders to students several times during the first part of each term encouraging use of the tool.
- Collection of information generated, along with any other supplemental data available, regarding evidence of academic activity.
- Design and creation of a process to withhold or withdraw aid from students if academic activity could not be demonstrated.
- Development of reports and other data dissemination mechanisms.

On the first day of instruction all registered students are notified via email that they are required to accept the Code of Academic Conduct and acknowledge beginning academic activity for each registered course. The Academic Participation tool is accessible through the student portal: MyUCDavis. Students must complete this academic activity by the census date, which is the 15th day of instruction of the quarter for both quarter and semester programs, and the 10th day of instruction for Summer Sessions. Students are requested to return to the tool immediately after adding any new classes.

Many Financial Aid programs and procedures were reviewed to determine the impact of this new process. In particular, the Return to Title IV processes saw a major change. Ironically, the new processes would actually reduce total Financial Aid workload as the new tools and mechanism put into place were able to automate formerly manual checks and validation.

More information is available at <https://participate.ucdavis.edu/>

Collaborations

In order to properly convey the new requirement to students, faculty, and staff a communication plan was developed. Many different departments participated in this effort that included messaging during student orientation, social media campaigns, student newsletter notices, newspaper articles, signage, buttons for staff to wear, presentations, and demos. The entire publication and communication effort included support from:

- Student Affairs Marketing and Communications
- Davis Division of the Academic Senate

- Office of the Chancellor and Provost Strategic Communications
- Marketing and Communications teams from Graduate Studies and professional schools (Law, Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, etc.)
- The Office of the University Registrar and the registrars of the professional schools
- The Financial Aid and Scholarships department as well as the financial aid teams specific to professional schools
- Academic Advising
- Athletic departments
- The student orientation team
- Global Affairs (for abroad students)
- Office of Student Support and Judicial Affairs
- Student Affairs Office for Student Life, Campus Community and Retention Services

Success

The Academic Participation program is considered a fantastic success. It is unusual to see a campus-wide program that impacts the entire student population be implemented so quickly and with so few hurdles. The primary challenges involved project coordination, documentation, and research to come up with the best path forward. Once the project plan was established there were very few complications.

The new process has been in place for two full terms and in each case more than 98% of students have used the Academic participation tool. The project team handled less than 20 student complaints and questions each term although advisors or student support staff may have fielded many other questions. While encountering no major technical issues, almost all feedback was neutral or positive. Some staff and faculty were initially confused or hesitant about the program but the opportunity to attend educational seminars and demonstrations alleviated most of those feelings.

FIGURE 1: TOTAL STUDENT PARTICIPATION

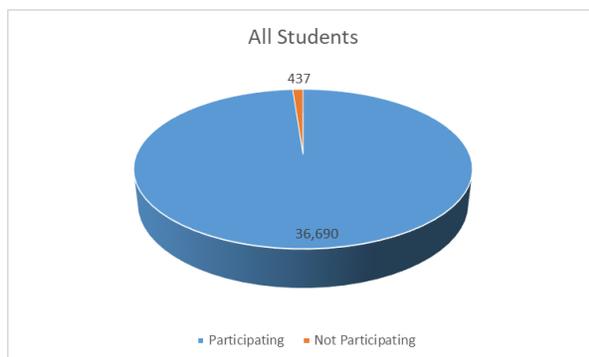
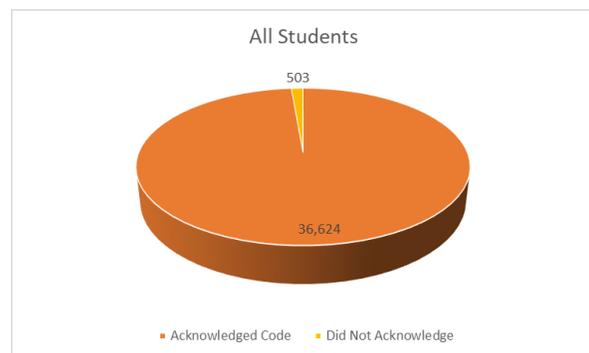


FIGURE 2: CODE OF ACADEMIC CONDUCT



In the end, thanks to a calling campaign that reached out to the last few students and an integration project to pull supplemental data from the Learning Management System less than 20 students had federal aid reduced or revoked as a result of failure to participate. Most of those students were later able to provide supplementary proof of academic activity and thus had their aid restored. **In total, only 5 students in the first term lost financial aid resulting in a success rate of 99.99%.** UC Davis was able to meet its regulatory obligations with minimal impact to students, staff, and faculty.

Costs

The effort did not include any significant new financial allocations or infrastructure purchases. However, a great deal of staff time was required. This included:

- 25+ meetings (average 9 attendees)
- 1000+ project management emails
- 20+ staff engaged in some form of communication
- 60+ hours of application development time
- 100+ hours of Financial Aid research, development, and analysis time
- 120+ hours of project management
- 3 large demonstrations, an informational website, and project documentation

Some minor expenses included ordering promotional buttons for the program for staff to wear, signage, and fliers/handouts. No new software or technical systems were required. Development was accomplished using already existing systems and development teams.

Beyond UC Davis

UC Davis has already prepared and presented a comprehensive program description and seminar for all UC schools. Since all UC schools take attendance in the same manner, they are all vulnerable to the same Department of Education finding in their next audit. Using UC Davis' solution as an example would allow them to implement a simple, inexpensive, yet fully compliant solution in minimal time and thus avoid potential fines. As a result, the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs for the UC system sent each of the campuses a letter requesting that they implement the same or similar solution to UC Davis' Academic Participation tool. In support of this effort, the project team will be presenting the solution again to UC Registrars' Council at their May meeting.

In addition, the CIO's for the California State University system reached out for a project demonstration, which was provided in late April. The project was also nominated for a Gold Star Award from the National Associate of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). Other universities nationwide have begun asking for more details or have expressed interest in implementing a similar solution. We believe UC Davis' Academic Participation program has a good chance to be one of the best and most innovative models for confirming academic activity in the nation.