January 2013

TO: All UC Irvine Computer Science MS students
FROM: Mike Carey, Vice Chair for Graduate Studies, UCI CS Department

Happy New Year and welcome to your next quarter in the UCI MS CS program!

I want to point out some things about our program that will help you meet UCI’s degree requirements. I want to make sure that everyone is on the same (correct) page, and I want to prevent as many of you as possible from landing yourselves in unfortunate circumstances, e.g., where you have a new job lined up, immigration paperwork in progress, but have just failed to meet UCI’s degree requirements. It is your responsibility to understand and to meet all of our requirements (see http://www.ics.uci.edu/grad/degrees/degree_cs.php for a list and some pointers to other related resources). If you fail to meet them, I can’t fix that for you, nor can the Graduate Advising Office staff, nor can the UCI Graduate Division. You need to plan your academic life carefully. Here are a few thoughts on how you might do that:

(1) **Plan your courses carefully.** You have chosen to come here and pay UC tuition for an MS degree, e.g., as opposed to going somewhere else (perhaps even with some support). It is now your responsibility to plan your courses so as to maximize your chances of graduating within your means – it is not UCI’s responsibility to grant exceptions if you mis-plan or you fail to pass some of your required classes with acceptable grades. Part of being in an academic program is finishing it properly, and part of finishing it means paying tuition until you have met all of its requirements.

(2) **Put the necessary effort into each course.** So you need to pass in quarter Q before your money runs out? Then do it – do it by investing the time and the energy required to do it – and by upping your effort level if your mid-course performance indicates “danger.” Talk to your instructor immediately upon noticing a “danger” sign! (“Help!! I’m worried. How can I do better in this class? What can I do on my own in order to better master the material so that I’ll do better on future homework assignments and the final?”) The end of the quarter is not the time to start looking for answers. Be constantly aware of how you are doing, and be proactive about making mid-course corrections if you see signs that you may be veering off-track.

(3) **Give yourself some flexibility in your Core courses.** MS students in CS are required to take 4 Core classes plus 7 other electives, yielding a total of 11 classes (not counting the seminar, which is a required but just-show-up class). There are currently 17 classes on the list of Core CS classes, distributed over 7 areas, of which you need only pick 4 (one from each of 4 areas) to take and only 3 must be passed at the “Comprehensive Exam” level of performance. If you are not finding yourself to be one of the top performers in your classes, then you should perhaps take Core classes only (or at least mostly) in order to hedge your bets. We have enough Core class options that almost all 11 of your MS classes could come from our list of 17 Core classes if you are in doubt. If you attempt 11 of these courses, you should be
able to pass 3 of them at the Comprehensive Exam level (!). So, please err on the side of taking too many Core classes, not too few. Also, if you don't pass one at the Comprehensive Exam level, you should seriously consider trying a different Core class rather than assuming that you'll pass the same Comprehensive Exam on the next try, as that material just may not be your strong suit.

(4) **Don't count your chickens before they hatch.** It is your responsibility to manage your life based on the reality of point (1) above and the requirements discussed in point (3) above. You should not commit to starting a job, convert to part-time status, or start your INS paperwork if your on-time graduation success is at all in doubt. *Nothing* should be assumed. You should not make post-UCI plans until you have met all the Core MS requirements. You should not make post-UCI plans if you are prone to "B" performance in classes and you are not hedging your bets carefully by over-taking classes to avoid last minute cases of a grade below a B or a Comprehensive Exam "NP" outcome. Nothing that is required for your MS CS degree, except perhaps for rounding out your grand total of 11 classes, should be deferred until your last term at UCI. Be smart about how you plan your courses!

(5) **Pressuring instructors when it is too late is not a substitute for planning ahead.** If you ignore the above suggestions, plan poorly, and then fall short, you have no one to blame but yourself. It is not acceptable to pressure your instructors to change your grade, to offer you a special make-up exam, or to otherwise grant you exceptional treatment under such circumstances.

(6) **Do not underestimate the difficulty of the Thesis option.** If you are considering the Thesis option, you need to realize that writing an MS thesis is a big investment of time and effort. This is especially true if you are not a natural/native English writer. If you do elect the Thesis option, you should make no post-UCI plans until the majority of your research is done and you've reached a clear understanding with your thesis advisor as to what your thesis is going to look like when it's done. It is not realistic to write an MS thesis in a month. You should expect your entire last quarter at UCI to be a "writing only" time period in most cases. It is likely to require multiple iterations with your advisor before your other thesis committee members should be expected to look at your thesis draft. Also, your other thesis committee members should be given 2 weeks to read your thesis. It is not acceptable to pressure your committee members at the last minute if you plan badly (i.e., if you plan too optimistically) and then end up in a last-minute time crunch. (See point (5) above.) You should be aware of the filing deadline for the quarter in which you plan to graduate and work backwards from there to set a work timetable to follow.

Please read these points several times and take them to heart. If you do, your MS work at UCI should go smoothly, and that's what my hope is for each of you. If you don't, you are putting your near-term future at risk – please don't do that! It is up to you to be aware of your progress, to be aware of the degree requirements, and to plan responsibly (and conservatively) so that you aren't in a bind at the end. “Drive” safely as you work towards your MS degree! 😊