Spark Working Group Charge

At UC Merced, best practices and internal assessment data support the importance of an intentional first-year experience, especially for first-generation students. However, offering Spark is challenging in the current budget environment at the department and school levels, particularly with the original aim for students to engage with faculty in small, first-year courses. Faculty survey results show broad support for the Spark requirement. Larger enrollment sections have been piloted and options aligned with specific majors and multiple models discussed to address the budget challenges. There is work to be done in developing a sustainable Spark model that retains the key benefits of the course.

Charge for the UC Merced Spark Working Group

The UC Merced Spark Working Group is charged with reviewing the current format for offering Spark courses, analyzing relevant data, and developing recommendations for a more sustainable approach to Spark as part of the general education curriculum. As part of this review, the working group will revisit the purpose and learning outcomes related to Spark, to ensure that the goals of the requirement are met while creatively addressing the issue of fiscal sustainability.

Key Responsibilities

The key responsibility for the Working Group is to develop a set of recommendations for a sustainable Spark model moving forward. The following should be considered to inform this process:

a. Review the purpose and learning outcomes of the Spark requirement
b. Review student outcomes data related to Spark
c. Review faculty input from spring 2026 GE survey related to Spark
d. Develop a clear understanding of the fiscal realities related to offering Spark in its current format
e. Consult with campus stakeholders as needed (School Deans, CFO, undergraduate students, GE Chair, DUEEC)
f. Refer to other relevant data provided by the Assessment Specialist in DUE or the Office of Institutional Research and Decision Support

Deliverable

The Spark Working Group will begin its work in August 2026 and will produce recommendations related to Spark by December 11, 2026. These recommendations will be presented to the DUE Executive Committee and Undergraduate Council for their consideration.

Membership

Membership of the Spark Working Group will include:

- Associate Dean from each school
- Representative from or appointed by each school Executive Committees
- CAPRA representative
- Brian O'Bruba – Student Affairs representative
- Alisha Kimble – Division of Undergraduate Education representative
- Representatives from both UGC and DUEEC

The group will elect a chair or co-chairs to convene and facilitate their work

Timeline

June-August: members contacted and membership confirmed

August-November: working group meetings and consultations

December 11: final recommendations due to UGC and DUE-EC