

FINAL REPORT

The Ad Hoc Task Force for Interdisciplinary Programming
College of Liberal Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

April 2014

INTRODUCTION

Calls for more interdisciplinary teaching and research on college campuses are fairly recent but have been around long enough to engender some backlash-style skepticism (see, for example, “Interdisciplinary Hype,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 22, 2009). On the one hand, that reaction is a sign that the movement toward greater interdisciplinarity in education has achieved critical mass. At the same time, it speaks to the resistance born of strong disciplinary and departmental allegiances. Universities seem designed to thwart cross-departmental projects.

We are convinced, however, that interdisciplinary (ID) programming¹ will continue to move toward the center, and away from the fringes, of the work done at universities. As said of the College of Liberal Arts later in this report, “Many scholarly endeavors that seem to be ‘disciplinary’ or ‘departmental’ in nature are already interdisciplinary, even within ‘traditional’ departmental structures.” Many of us already partner with faculty in other departments and colleges, and we draw on theory and scholarship from fields other than those we trained in.

ID programming presents a number of opportunities. For faculty, ID activities facilitate non-traditional activities and partnerships beyond their disciplines, aiding professional development (and potentially even increasing satisfaction and retention). ID experiences support growth of research networks or project-driven teams, and interactions encouraged by joint ID scholarship enable new curricular partnerships. For faculty in departments without degrees, ID programs afford opportunities to integrate with degree-granting programs and can allow faculty in general to reach distinct student groups (such as graduate students). ID experiences complement disciplinary work, broaden expertise, strengthen credentials, and serve as a catalyst for problem-solving and collaborations that increasingly demand scholarship across disciplinary boundaries.

For students, ID programs and ID student mentoring offer opportunities to capture emerging interdisciplinary fields, to incorporate career-oriented characteristics into disciplines otherwise thought to lack them, and to encourage students to explore problems and solutions critically beyond practices in a given discipline. Through ID experiences, students expand vocabularies, interaction skills, and networking strategies, which help prepare them as flexible and successful team collaborators in their careers beyond RIT. ID programs also help the university respond to students and faculty seeking challenges beyond a discipline, and provide opportunities to recruit and retain such student and faculty talent. Programs combining STEM and the Liberal Arts may better attract populations currently underrepresented at RIT, such as women students.

One option is to stand back and allow ID projects to advance on their own, which in fact has been the practice for years. But faculty report considerable frustration in going it alone (see below, “Survey of College of Liberal Arts Faculty,” under Summary of the Task Force’s Work), which leads us to conclude that supporting ID programming calls for a clear vision, strong leadership, unambiguous processes, and administrative policies. This report provides explicit recommendations that address: 1) the Articulation of Values, 2) Commitment of Resources, 3) Establishing Practices, 4) Departmental Leadership, and 5) Long-term Planning. These we describe in the Recommendations section of the report.

First, though, we offer an introduction to the Task Force and its charge, describe its work during the 2013-2014 academic year, and summarize its findings.

¹ Throughout the report, unless otherwise noted, “interdisciplinary programming” is used to encompass interdisciplinary research, teaching, and curriculum development.

THE AD HOC TASK FORCE FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMMING, ITS CHARGE, AND A SUMMARY OF ITS WORK

The Ad Hoc Task Force for Interdisciplinary Programming (TFIP) in the College of Liberal Arts was established and charged by Dean Jamie Winebrake on September 30, 2013 (memo, “Ad Hoc Task Force for Interdisciplinary Programming in the College of Liberal Arts”). As noted by the Dean, “To facilitate ... interdisciplinary activity, we need administrative structures in place that provide the freedom and incentives for faculty to explore, innovate, and take risks. Whether we currently have such structures in place to appropriately nurture these activities is a key question for the college.” The task force was formed to address this and other questions related to interdisciplinary teaching, research, and curricula.

The members include:

- **Babak Elahi**, Department of English, Associate Dean (Dean’s Representative)
- **Michael Laver**, Department of History, International and Global Studies Program Director
- **Tina Lent**, Department of Performing Arts and Visual Culture, Museum Studies Program Director
- **David Martins**, Department of English, Director of the University Writing Program (Vice Chair)
- **Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm**, Department of English
- **Judy Porter**, Department of Criminal Justice, Undergraduate Program Director
- **Pat Scanlon**, Chair, Department of Communication (Chair)

The Dean’s Charge to the Task Force

Whereas the College of Liberal Arts has an increasing interest in supporting interdisciplinary curriculum development and scholarship in the college; and, whereas the College of Liberal Arts has identified potential barriers to the fostering and expansion of interdisciplinary curriculum development and scholarship based on the aforementioned discussion, a new Ad Hoc Task Force on Interdisciplinary Programming will be established to consider at a minimum the following questions:

- *How do faculty “opt-in” to an interdisciplinary program and/or how to do faculty “opt-out” of such a program (without penalty)?*
- *What barriers exist beyond those contained herein that prevent interdisciplinary collaboration on curriculum and scholarship? How can those barriers be successfully overcome?*
- *What organizational structures (beyond departments and programs) would help foster interdisciplinary curriculum development, curriculum management, and scholarship? How would such structures be staffed and what support would be needed to help these structures thrive?*
- *Whether alternative structures are recommended or not, what written agreements are necessary in order to ensure that faculty can participate in interdisciplinary activities without ‘punishing’ the faculty member or his/her home department? What topics would these agreements need to address (e.g., course scheduling, plan of work approval, merit review process, tenure decisions, etc.)?*
- *How does college policy need to change to recognize the emergence of interdisciplinary programs and structures?*

- *If new structures are recommended, how would leadership and staffing of those structures be determined?*
- *What other barriers exist that prevent interdisciplinary collaboration and what resources or incentives are needed overcome those barriers?*

Finally, the dean suggested the TFIP “operate with two key principles in place,” that (1) “student success must drive our organizational structure,” and (2) there be “faculty empowerment and voice.”

Summary of the Task Force’s Work

Beginning in October 2013 and working through April 2014, the TFIP:

1. Collected and reviewed literature on ID efforts in the U.S. That literature, as well as all other documents gathered by the Task Force, was placed on a myCourses site. See the Select Bibliography.
2. Surveyed College of Liberal Arts faculty on what helped or hindered their ID efforts.
3. Canvassed administrators in other RIT colleges concerning ID programming.
4. Formed three subgroups to look into ways ID work could be fostered at the college, department, and program levels.
5. Developed a set of short- and long-term recommendations for the College of Liberal Arts.

FINDINGS
Survey of College of Liberal Arts Faculty

On November 1, 2013, TFIP sent an email to all CLA faculty:

Subject: Task Force on Interdisciplinary Programming asks for your help

Hi,

The Task Force on Interdisciplinary Programming has begun its work and needs your help. If you have had experience at RIT with interdisciplinary programs, teaching, and/or research, would you reply to this email with any obstacles you've encountered as well as what has smoothed the way? We'll keep your response anonymous and confidential.

Thanks,

The members of the Task Force:

Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm
 Babak Elahi
 Michael Laver
 Tina Lent
 David Martins
 Judy Porter
 Pat Scanlon

The email was repeated a week later. Finally, 12 faculty responded with their perceptions of what obstructs or supports ID. Following is a summary of those responses.

What hinders interdisciplinary teaching?

- Co-teaching should count as a full course in one's teaching load across campus [the College of Liberal Arts allows for one co-taught class each year to count as one full course of a teaching load].
- Fights over resources and credit inhibit success.

What hinders interdisciplinary research?

- Top-tier journals "might not appreciate" interdisciplinary research.
- Lack of administrative support.
- Participants "want to establish at the outset who gets what and exactly what will happen on what timeline."
- With science and humanities: "There is sometimes the perception that Liberal Arts is or should be easy, and the sciences are hard."

What promotes interdisciplinary research?

- Interdisciplinary research projects attract internal funding because they fit an RIT goal.
- An interdisciplinary research group meeting weekly to discuss "issues, connections, current research, etc. as does SMERC [Science and Mathematics Education Research Collaborative]."
- MAGIC helpful with feedback and suggestions.

What hinders sponsored research?

- Cross-college salary differences cause reward inequities.
- Having PIs and Co-PIs results in disparities in support and credit.
- Participants “want to establish at the outset who gets what and exactly what will happen on what timeline.”

Canvass of Administrators in other RIT Colleges

To determine what colleges have done to facilitate ID programming and what obstacles they have encountered, Michael Laver met with either the dean or a designated representative from NTID, CAST, COS, CIAS, GCCIS, and CHST. While the experience of every college is necessarily and obviously different, nevertheless, a few overarching items stand out as common denominators.

- College leadership must be “proactive,” in the words of the dean of CHST, in ensuring that their faculty know that when they go up for tenure, or when the annual evaluation comes around, ID research will be rewarded. Colleges must recognize that such research is often time consuming, especially if a joint grant application is involved. Furthermore, as NTID related, money and other incentives should be made available to facilitate at least the initial stages of collaboration. And finally, as the institute, and our fields of research in general, become more inherently interdisciplinary, colleges must begin to think about joint hires that cross traditional boundaries. This is something that CHST is exploring, but that, at least initially, has been a challenge.
- The colleges, and more importantly the university itself, must address ways to make joint grant applications and joint publications more equitable. As it stands now, there is a PI and a co-PI, with a greater reward incentive attached to being the PI. Colleges might either treat both with equal weight, or treat each grant-making faculty member in this position on a case-by-case basis to determine accurately the role of the faculty member in the grant.
- Colleges must facilitate the allocation of space and the opportunity for researchers and teachers from different disciplines to get together. NTID created research centers, COLA held mixers, CAST invited select faculty from other colleges to its scholarship events, and COS encouraged cross-disciplinary collaboration on graduate advisory teams. Still, numerous faculty, at least anecdotally, report feeling that they work in a silo, and it may be up to the college to provide the space and opportunity for faculty to break out of their silos.
- One interesting idea from CAST is for either individual colleges or the whole institute to set up a searchable database of all faculty by research area. Included might be a list of grant-funded projects, ongoing projects, and the like. This was echoed by the dean of CHST who said that one challenge in ID research was finding people across a rather large institute who might be working in a particular field. Right now that process apparently happens largely by word of mouth, or in the colleges that hold research mixers, on a bilateral basis with other colleges.

In the end, it seems that the way that colleges can best support ID programs is largely the same as the way colleges would support any other initiative: by assigning credit to faculty who do research in this

field; by allocating space and other resources to faculty interested in pursuing ID research and teaching; by facilitating cross-disciplinary contacts within the college and beyond; and by ensuring that ID grant making and publication are rewarded fairly and accurately.

Reports of Subgroups on Fostering Interdisciplinary Work at College, Department, and Program Levels

The task force formed three subgroups to explore ways that ID work can be supported at the College (Laver and Porter), Department (Elahi and Scanlon), and Program (Lent, Martins and Alm) levels. Following are reports by each of the subgroups, which include recommendations. Many of these were used as the basis of the formal recommendations in the next section of the report.

College Support for Interdisciplinary Scholarship and Teaching

At the college level, ID can be facilitated by several mechanisms. The Dean's backing is essential in providing administrative support in the form of encouragement, the establishment of clear guidelines about what constitutes ID programs, and rewards for ID teaching and research. Rather than making major changes in policy concerning tenure, promotion, and merit, support can be created via formalized processes that are clearly advocated by the Dean. A list of criteria for recognition of a course offering as an ID course should be generated.

Guidelines that allow for the consideration of ID for purposes of merit, tenure, and promotion are essential for teaching and for research. Updating the college handbook can be beneficial. The handbook should recognize and encourage ID collaboration in the tenure process. Cross-listed courses are a good way to share resources. Again, guidelines should be clear for the administration of resources. Some administrative encouragement and support for the development of ID efforts may include:

- The creation of faculty learning communities and faculty workshops in order to provide support for ID teaching and research. Gather interested faculty to work with ID efforts.
- Create an ID unit within the dean's office. A director of ID programming is desirable and is usually an associate provost or a member of a dean's office.
- Incorporate ID program needs into the processes of campus governance and the distribution of resources: money, personnel, equipment, and space.
- The creation of ID institutes, centers, or departments can bypass some of these concerns.

Many institutions jointly appoint faculty between a department and an institute or research center. The institute pays a portion of the faculty member's salary. Promotion and tenure decisions are handled through the home department. Joint hires can fulfill responsibilities in two departments and provide opportunities for interdisciplinary work.

Transparent financial policies are important. Interdisciplinary faculty or directors should be present at budget and planning meetings. The Dean's office should negotiate with other colleges as to class scheduling, costs, credit hours, and division of labor. Memoranda of Understanding should be developed that provide clear guidelines and procedures for faculty and departmental expectations. Deans can

absorb some of the associated costs of providing ID collaboration in the form of negotiation concerning funding or by providing a budget dedicated to ID. Administration can provide resources to departments for hiring adjuncts to cover courses or for additional administrative support staff. The Dean's office can provide dispute settlement should the need arise.

Departmental Support for Interdisciplinary Scholarship and Teaching

Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Stephanie Pfirman and research collaborators make a very practical suggestion about how departments can remain sensitive to ID faculty research agendas early on in a faculty member's career: "It is best to identify *at the time of hiring* how the departmental recommendation for tenure will be structured: interdisciplinary committee, or one or two departments" ("Collaborative Efforts: Promoting Interdisciplinary Scholars," February 11, 2005). We offer this specific example to underscore the very real ways that departmental leadership can support and sustain ID teaching and scholarship. Rather than advocating for the creation of ID departments, the focus of this part of the report is to offer guidance as to how existing departments and department chairs can help sustain ID teaching and scholarship by both fostering a culture of interdisciplinarity, and maintaining practical processes that acknowledge, support, and, as appropriate, reward ID teaching and scholarship.

Interdisciplinary Culture within Disciplinary Departments: Making the Invisible Visible

Many scholarly endeavors that seem to be "disciplinary" or "departmental" in nature are already interdisciplinary, even within "traditional" departmental structures. For instance, our departments of Communication; English; Science, Technology and Society; Performing Arts and Visual Culture; Sociology/Anthropology; and Criminal Justice, as well as others, already bring together ID approaches that span humanities and social science, that rely on theories and knowledge generated in tributary and allied disciplines, and speak to more than a single strand of scholarly endeavor. And many departments, including Public Policy, Economics, History, and Psychology already have partnerships that span the college's various departments as well as the university's various program areas. However, departments should find ways to make these efforts visible. As Julie Thompson Klein has argued, interdisciplinary work is often marked by "'invisible' patterns of communication," scholarly and teaching activity that falls outside the recognized realms of formal departmental process and communication.²

In sum, department chairs should recognize, support, and reward, as appropriate, ID activity among the departments' faculty.

Departmental Processes that Support Interdisciplinary Teaching and Scholarship

Practical and concrete efforts must be part of the practice, discourse, and structures that sustain and support interdisciplinarity. These efforts must occur within key realms and at key times in a faculty member's career and within a department's operations. These areas include processes and

² Thompson Klein, Julie. "The Interdisciplinary Archipelago," in *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice*. (Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1990), 49.

communications at the time of hiring a faculty member (appointment letters, contracts, and even, perhaps, during campus visits and interviews).

- **Hiring:** When hiring someone with ID research or teaching expectations
 - make obligations clear on appointment letters
 - write a contract, if need be, with the departments involved
 - spell out the composition of pre-tenure and tenure committees; identify at the time of hiring how the departmental recommendation for tenure will be structured: an interdisciplinary committee, or one or two departments
- **Tenure and Promotion:** Revise departmental tenure and promotion criteria to reflect, support, and, where appropriate, reward ID efforts
- **Scholarship:** Clear up confusion or apprehension regarding authorship: educate review committees about the significance of co-authorship in an ID field perhaps by calling on a senior scholar in that field
- **Mentoring:** Develop and maintain robust mentorship programs in particular to guide those working in ID fields
- **Collaborative, Interdisciplinary Teaching:** Be flexible on ID teaching assignments. For example, more than one co-taught course per academic year might count as a full course in a faculty member's course load if it supports important ID efforts, whether those supported by existing memoranda of understanding or those working towards the development of new ID programs. This will also involve open lines of communication and support between departments when a faculty member's expertise and course offerings can serve more than one department's mission. Cross listing of courses, when appropriate and necessary, should be supported. Finally, support for these ID efforts (teaching loads, cross listing of courses, etc.) will also require support from the Dean's office.
- **Agreements and Disputes:** We already have a number of inter-departmental and inter-college memoranda of understanding. We have both formal and informal agreements. However, it is important to be responsive to those occasions when inter-departmental agreements (and at the college level, inter-college partnerships) are less easily resolved. We recommend that the Dean's office, in consultation with the department chairs, establish a means of dispute resolution. We recommend that this means of resolution take the form of a policy that includes the involvement of the dean to step in when department chairs cannot reach agreements on collaborative ID efforts.

Features of ID Program Structures

The structures of ID programs are highly contextual. A quick search of university websites reveals a broad variance of organizational structures, institutional commitments, faculty and student participation, and articulated policies. We explored a range of different types of programs: ID departments/department collaborations *within* Liberal Arts at RIT, departments/department collaborations *between Liberal Arts colleges and at least one other college*, and ID *across colleges/university-wide*. Based on online information and communication with administrators of a

number of prominent ID programs, we identified the following dimensions and features as particularly relevant to the discussion of *structures* for ID programming:

Aim	Degree v. Research Degree Granting v. Non-Degree Granting
Evaluation	Ongoing Assessment v. Counts
Space	Physical v. Virtual
Leadership	Co-Leads v. Primary Lead College-Based v. Across Colleges v. Institutional
Participants	Students + Faculty v. Students Dual- v. Multi-Unit (Center/Departmental/Inter-Departmental) Static Affiliation v. Problem/Project-Oriented Affiliation
Intentionality	ID as Overtly Expressed v. Covertly Existing

Without prescribing particular program structures, the importance of several ID features can be highlighted, including (but not limited to) the following:

- Making available physical space for developing and nurturing ID partnerships
- Engaging both faculty and students (such as avoiding “homeless” programs where students take courses across departments without faculty involvement or articulated ID partnerships)
- Establishing processes and metrics for systematically evaluating the success of ID programming
- Recognizing that problem-based and project-oriented structures are promising mechanisms for stimulating dynamic engagement between ID faculty

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the following recommendations are for immediate action at the College and Department levels, with an emphasis on strong leadership from the Dean's office. These recommendations follow from the task force's conclusion that no amount of good intentions and enthusiasm will suffice to bring about ID success without commitment and direction from the top.

As noted in the Introduction, "interdisciplinary program" and "interdisciplinary programming" include research, teaching, and curriculum development.

For Immediate Action

Leadership from the Dean's office:

Articulation of values:

1. Articulate a college vision of and commitment to ID programming, including degree programs.
2. Articulate a common understanding of ID learning goals that will drive the cycle of curricular innovation, development, assessment, and improvement.
3. Align ID program aims with needed resources: space, faculty, lab equipment, staffing, and materials.

Commitment of resources:

4. Create an ID director—for example, an associate dean of ID studies.
5. Allocate physical space for ID research and projects taking place within the College of Liberal Arts and with faculty and students in other colleges.
6. Allocate funds for ID faculty development, teaching, and research.

Establishment of practices:

7. Create transparent financial policies for ID programs, including criteria for how budgets are established and reviewed.
8. Create faculty learning communities and faculty workshops to provide support for ID teaching and research.
9. Establish practices and standards for evaluating and assessing ID programs in terms of faculty and student success (as applicable).
10. Ensure that ID faculty and/or program directors are present at budget and other institutional planning and governance meetings, and that ID programs have the same rights and responsibilities as disciplinary programs, from program approval to program review, and that contributing departments have a voice in each program's decision making.
11. Resolve disputes between and within departments regarding ID efforts, such as research released time and teaching assignments.
12. Ensure that ID programs adopt structures that ensure and enable strong faculty engagement across disciplines. These structures include but are not limited to Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) for core faculty as well as faculty associates/affiliates, ID curriculum and steering committees, and transparent processes for decision making within the program.

Leadership at the department level:

13. Revise departmental tenure and promotion criteria to articulate and align with the college's ID goals.
14. Revise departmental tenure and promotion criteria to recognize and encourage ID work.
15. Be flexible with ID teaching assignments (for example: allow more than one co-taught course per year).
16. Be flexible with teaching and service released time for research opportunities (for example, for grants).
17. Count ID mentoring (for example on theses) as part of the teaching load, and align this practice among all departments.

Long-term Recommendations

18. Constitute a standing Committee for Interdisciplinary Programming.
19. Seek external funding for ID programming.
20. Reach out to other colleges and work with the Provost to establish Institute policies for cross-college collaboration in teaching and research.
21. Work with other colleges to create a searchable database to facilitate ID programming.

CONCLUSION

Too often, creative ID projects—say, a course co-taught by two professors from different colleges—are stymied by inflexible administrative processes and people. One college gives a faculty member full credit for co-teaching a class, another does not. That sort of mismatch can be the death of what would otherwise be a long-term collaboration. Too many promising ventures end up as “one and done” lines on a merit self-evaluation.

Yet, as we’ve described in this report, ID presents numerous opportunities for students and faculty. Moreover, we are convinced that, far from being simply an academic fad, interdisciplinarity is in fact the academy’s future.

The College of Liberal Arts has an opportunity to lead the way on ID programming. But, as our report and recommendations should make clear, that will require a well-articulated College vision, strong leadership, and a long-term commitment.

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