Interdisciplinary Action Team Charge  
Provost William Radke

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Charge(s):
“Determine if there is a need for an interdisciplinary model in addition to the current model of programs housed within an existing department/school or college that require or designate electives from other academic units.”

“If an interdisciplinary model is required then formulate guidelines and policies for developing, implementing and successfully supporting the model.”

Preamble:
Interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum at the undergraduate level are getting increased attention nationally (Boyer Commission Report 1998). Within disciplinary groups, such as “STEM” disciplines, this desire is increasingly evident (e.g., Bio2010 2003, Steen 2008), but the practice is in evidence among many academic disciplines. Since 2004, the division of Academic Affairs at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) recognized the need for interdisciplinary interaction (see Long-term Academic Goals document). Specifically, UCO’s academic goals include “supporting learning collaborations” on the UCO campus. To the extent that such an approach to curriculum development is consistent with our mission to “help students learn”, we have (below) examined the prospect of interdisciplinary type programs on the UCO campus.

Our team represents a broad array of faculty from all colleges on our campus. All of us are in some way involved in interdisciplinary approaches to teaching, research and/or service. In addition to our desire to see the product of our report align with the mission and goals of the university, we also wanted to ensure that our activities considered the practical elements of program development. Namely, that we continue to respect and preserve rights of faculty in the areas of
1) tenure and promotion, 2) pay and 3) appropriate reassignment time in compensation for efforts toward any new interdisciplinary program that might arise on our campus.

Our concerns are consistent with the Provost’s charge to this committee (see above) on 1 November, 2007. The structure of our report therefore follows the nearly 24 elements he detailed to us in that charge. We end the report with conclusions that support our answer to the first part of the charge.

The action team feels there is a need for an interdisciplinary model in addition to the current programs housed within an existing department/school or college that may require or designate electives from other academic units.

The following are guidelines and policies for developing, implementing, and successfully supporting the model.

I. Program/Curriculum Issues

A. Who initiates interdisciplinary proposals? Proposals for new interdisciplinary programs could be initiated by units (departments, colleges/disciplinary levels, faculty, students, stakeholders, or advisory boards. The “level” of the unit involved will depend upon the breadth of the program and/or its origin point. For example, the “Leadership Minor” (with the UNIV prefix) was organized through higher administration levels and was submitted directly to the AACC (rather than going through the departmental and college curriculum committees). However, the Women’s Studies Minor originated from a Department (English) and would be involved in curriculum review at the departmental and/or college levels.

B. Who reviews interdisciplinary proposals? Review and approval of requests for interdisciplinary programs will be conducted by the AACC, at the very least, and departments and colleges as appropriate (OSRHE approval is assumed). As noted above, the point of origin of the proposed program will dictate the nature of the review process. However, any program (regardless of “level”) will need to be vetted by at least the AACC to ensure an appropriate peer review process that respects faculty governance. Depending upon whether the interdisciplinary program results in a major or minor (as is the case for six “Interdisciplinary Minors” described in the UCO Undergraduate Catalog), there will be implications to be considered for Regents approval.
C. **How does the interdisciplinary program relate to student careers?**

How the proposed program connects to current and emerging career opportunities for graduates will be determined by stakeholders, advisory boards, and regional/national databases (indicators of current enrollment). External Advisory Boards are an excellent resource for this information. However, such information can be anecdotal and subject to the opinions of individuals on the Boards. Some form of additional, more quantitative, data should be gathered in support of the need for proposed programs. Any enrollment numbers for similar programs should be obtained, if possible. The need for student outcomes, as indicated by assessment, in the proposed interdisciplinary program will need to be balanced by the resources required for the program to succeed.

D. **Who manages curriculum development/revision?** Curriculum development and revision will be managed by the program director. The “level” at which the revision occurs will depend upon the nature of the program. (See above under I-A and I-B.) The clearly-defined goals for student learning established by faculty from all of the disciplines involved will be ensured by the current curriculum process. Whenever possible, all levels of the peer review process should be employed (departmental, college and university) to ensure that faculty governance is encouraged and so that as many “eyes” as possible can examine the proposed program. Existing standards for prerequisites and course rigor should also be carefully considered when only one or two levels of review are employed in the review process.

E. **How will existing assessments be managed?** SSCI and other assessments required of all academic programs will be overseen by the director of the program and written by the faculty from all of the disciplines involved. As noted above (I-A and I-B), the management of the program should relate to the program’s origin. Modifications to the current review process will potentially include additional chairpersons (if the program spans departments) and deans (if it crosses colleges).

II. Management and Operational Issues

A. **Where will interdisciplinary programs reside?** Interdisciplinary programs could reside within a department, college, or “UNIV”. Indeed, as indicated above (Section I), the management of the program will probably be closely related to its origin in the curriculum process. However, two factors interface with one another on this issue. First, the administrative structure itself may occur in a single “place” (a dean’s,
chair’s or faculty member’s office) or across the membership of an advisory committee (but presumably with someone identified as a chair or facilitator of the group). Secondly, however, the physical location of the program may be an issue. If an interdisciplinary program couples together colleges, within which college should the director physically reside? Similarly, should faculty members be able to reside in more than one location? We have established four potential “models” to sort out these differences (Appendix A).

B. **How will the programs be funded?** Interdisciplinary programs will be funded by the Provost (E&G – “hard money”), external sources (federal/state agencies – “soft money”) as initiated by college Deans, differential tuition, and/or course fees. As described above, the development of any interdisciplinary program should include a planning process that is tied to budget. The current academic planning process includes an annual “AALT” retreat in which new programs (and their costs) are addressed by the deans and (academic) assistant vice presidents in the presence of the Provost and Vice-Provost. If funding is not externally derived, the program will have to compete with other proposals and/or be resourced through the reallocation of funds from another program. Clearly, funding will require a direct line of communication between the provost, deans, chairs and faculty impacted by the program. This is important since the President and Regents will also want an assessment of the additional cost of a program before approving it.

C. **How will physical, financial and human resources be managed?** Physical, financial, and human resources will be managed within the current system but alternatives can be considered such as the director, departmental chairs, etc. Oversight of resources will need to comply with the current (and standard) system in which the Provost, deans and chairs have input/guidance on resource expenditures. It is therefore critical that all levels of management be in philosophical resonance with clear avenues of communication. In the case of faculty hires, it will be more important than ever to build selection committees with “outside” representation. This may include faculty, administration and students from a variety of administrative units.

III. Faculty Issues

A. **How will faculty hiring decisions involving joint appointments be made?** The hiring committee for a faculty member with joint appointments will be comprised of a broad representation of academic
units and a neutral chair. The committee should be “balanced” among the
disciplines involved, without a majority representation from any one unit
(unless decided otherwise).

B. How will faculty compensation be determined based on CUPA
guidelines? Faculty compensation will be based on the CUPA average of
their respective departments or disciplines. This should be determined by
the academic department the faculty member resides in for his/her basic
area of expertise. (However, we can envision circumstances in which a
faculty member’s expertise may cross departmental lines.) Teaching
assignments should be avoided as a basis for salary, given the degree of
fluctuation that would occur among semesters.

C. How will faculty load be calculated? Faculty load will be 12 hours with
proportional loads by departments. Chairs and deans may have to become
involved (e.g., through an MOU) to ensure that an adequate load
assignment is made to accurately gauge the faculty member’s performance
in a particular unit (department and/or college).

D. How and by whom will faculty be evaluated and to whom will those
evaluations be directed? Faculty will be evaluated by multiple
departments with those evaluations directed to multiple department charts,
deans, and the director. As noted above, chairs and deans may have to
develop an MOU to ensure that no misunderstandings develop further
down the tenure and promotion timeline. This may take the form of a
modified activities agreement that we currently use to assess emphases in
teaching, scholarship and service.
Note: consider department culture, tenure and promotion, and fidelity to
units.

E. How will tenure and promotion decisions be made? The tenure and
promotion process will need to recognize the need for a non-silo solution,
i.e., the director. An intermediary “judge”, such as a director, would be of
potential importance, here. However, this situation also points out the
need for a “higher” level of tenure/promotion contemplation: at the
university level. Many other universities have such a level of deliberation
to ensure that objective decisions are reached (ensuring plenty of “checks
and balances”).
IV. Student Issues

A. How and when will students be admitted? The selection criteria for admitting students to the interdisciplinary programs will be contained within an application packet. This will specify the guidelines and any tests, essays, or minimum GPAs required for admission. As noted in previous sections, an oversight committee and/or director for the program in question would be useful to the process. It is important to note that not all programs will require an actual admission process. Some programs (like the one we have examined at SWOSU) have no selection criteria.

B. Who will be responsible for student advisement? The director and faculty from participating academic units will be responsible for advising students. We would also expect that university advisers in the enrollment offices would also have to have familiarity with these programs to ensure that all potentially interested students get the opportunity to be informed of their existence.

C. Who will determine transfer of credit (articulation) guidelines? The current process for determining transfer of credit guidelines will be followed within each academic unit. This process may be “tricky” since the interdisciplinary program in question is unlikely to bear much similarity to the programs producing the transfer students.

D. Who will determine scheduling of courses? The scheduling of courses will be a cooperative effort of the director and the department chairs. This approach may argue for a more centralized system of scheduling perhaps in a dean’s or director’s office.

E. How will assessment be managed? The current process involving the SSCI, the annual strategic plan, and accreditation, if required, will be overseen by the director of the program; essentially, the same model currently used will be applied to the interdisciplinary unit for on-campus assessment. If this program can be accredited, advance communication with the accreditation bodies (including a possible pre-site visit or workshops) would be advisable.
V. Other Considerations

A. Input from stakeholders and an external advisory board. In addition to the regular campus curriculum review process, the relevancy of new programs should be checked through review by stakeholders in the community and region whenever possible. This necessitates the development of external advisory boards in the units that will house and/or support proposed interdisciplinary programs.

B. Design based on benchmarks/other institutions that have well established interdisciplinary policies (Appendix A). Rather than “reinventing the wheel”, developing interdisciplinary programs should be benchmarked against existing ones at other institutions. This may be facilitated by site visits to and from “model” institutions as is often practiced for accreditation. National conferences may also provide workshops or presentations that may assist the development of these endeavors.

C. Alignment with the practices and policies of the regulatory bodies (RUSO, OSRHE, HCL/NCA, accreditation agencies, and professional societies). As noted above, conferences, workshops and other meetings should be exploited for information pertaining to alignment with goals and conformity to policy of higher educational bodies (including accrediting bodies). Indeed, much of this alignment is, in theory, already occurring at the academic affairs and university levels, leaving it to the academic units to respond to this same policy.

D. Startup costs which would include: flyers/advertising; reassignment time/stipends; scholarships/fund raising; out-of-state tuition waivers; additional faculty, staff, and a Director; and space. Although there are many options for developing interdisciplinary programs “on the cheap” with existing space and revenue, we should not lose sight of the fact that our university is far below its peers in faculty numbers and funding (both regionally and nationally). Any new program should be assumed to have costs. At a minimum, advertising the program to students will be a cost, but that does not include adjunct and/or full-time faculty costs. Some interdisciplinary programs may actually become less expensive in terms of administrative management time with a director, for example, but the cost of that individual (in stipends, reassignment time, etc.) may offset those perceived advantages. Additional classroom space is always an issue in the development of a new program. Furthermore, the continually declining state funding levels may necessitate fundraising and grantsmanship as replacement for lost funding (for scholarships, tuition
waivers, etc.). Many such “start-up” costs are, in reality, permanent costs that will need to have their own budget lines in the future.

Conclusions:

We provide several conclusions from our time together on this Action Team.

First, the financial cost of any new program at the University of Central Oklahoma must be weighed against the need of existing programs for faculty positions and funds to support student learning (including scholarships, learning spaces, etc.). Any new program has the potential to impact all other programs on the campus. Therefore, the value of the program must be weighed, in a systematic way, with representatives of other academic units on campus. Mechanisms are currently in place to support such an exchange of information (e.g., AACC, AALT, etc.).

We recognize and embrace the increasing national discussion about interdisciplinary curricula on college campuses across the United States. Particularly at the graduate or professional school level, this trend has been occurring for decades and often with excellent results. However, we also understand the value of a traditional, disciplinary-based education. We have contemplated whether employers (and other stakeholders) may value this approach to education over an interdisciplinary one because they can be assured of the standards of the education their employees receive in a traditional curriculum. (e.g., the activities of many accreditation bodies do not necessarily support the interdisciplinary approach.) Indeed, we have discovered that the existence of academic “minors” on our campus may be an appropriate profile for at least some interdisciplinary programs (while other minors may be programs “in waiting”).

Developing an interdisciplinary program is a complex process, involving many variables. Chief among these is how to effectively manage a program that resides between academic units. The socio-political issues of program ownership should not be underestimated while developing an interdisciplinary program. There are clear implications for faculty in the areas of tenure and promotion. Who oversees a faculty member who works between departments in such a program? Input from a director with the authority of a dean in the tenure and promotion process may help, but ultimately the welfare of faculty must be kept in mind in such programs. (A university level committee with oversight on tenure and promotion processes may also be a solution to this potential problem.) In a related way, the manner in which the program is physically housed (coupled with administrative oversight) may complicate the ability of the program to function effectively.
The potential for interdisciplinary studies on our campus are many and exciting to consider. We strongly encourage the consideration of such programs but with the understanding that they are highly variable in nature depending upon where they arise within the academic hierarchy (department, college, university, etc.). Once the location of an interdisciplinary program is established, it should be examined by other members of the campus for its impact on our limited resources during this high-growth period in our university’s history. Each program will likely have its unique set of circumstances to deal with. Our Action Team cannot predict exactly what those circumstances will be. However, we feel the aforementioned issues should be viewed as broad considerations for any new disciplinary program.

LITERATURE CITED


Appendix A: Models

1. **“Stand Alone” Model.** This model describes interdisciplinary programs that are housed in “brick and mortar” facilities, without sharing faculty among outside units. It is the most expensive yet most administratively cohesive form of an interdisciplinary program, typically having its own Dean or Director. Examples include the Environmental Studies Program(s) at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. This model offers more direct control of the interdisciplinary program and more direct commitment by the university where it is housed, but has a lot of direct cost (primarily due to management costs).

2. **Independent Program Model.** This type of program is least expensive from an administrative point of view, but is also more diffuse in its organization. All teaching is handled through “borrowed” faculty members who reside in other units. The program is integrated from other existing programs. Examples include the following universities: 1) Rensselaer, 2) Syracuse, 3) Towson, 4) Florida and 5) OU. The benefits of such a program include the facts that it can be constructed de novo without a lot of administrative restructuring. However, such programs may have limited options to the university and is not physically integrated very well.

3. **Hybrid Model.** This type of arrangement shares characteristics of both Models 1 and 2, above. It would have a centralized administration in a separate, physical unit (e.g., College). However, some or most of the faculty would be “borrowed” from other academic units with a centralized dean or director. Examples include 1) the University of California at Santa Barbara, 2) the UCO Forensic Science Institute and (potentially) 3) the UCO Graduate College. The downside to such an arrangement is the split commitment represented among units (in terms of faculty) to the interdisciplinary program.

4. **General Model (“Build Your Own”).** This is a student driven model in which programs are built from “scratch” within certain limits (e.g., guided by prerequisites). The student selects an advisory committee and a Director serves to oversee the process between academic units. This kind of program would have to borrow faculty from other units on a campus and have a Director with a group (or committee) of advising faculty members. Examples of universities where we have discovered such programs include: 1) North Carolina State, 2) MIT, 3) UC Berkeley, and 4) SWOSU. The advantage of such a program is that it allows career self-actualization by students but it has diffuse (potentially inadequate) administrative oversight.

Expense scale (cheap to expensive)
Models ranked: 1) Independent, 2) General, 3) Hybrid, 4) Stand Alone.

Administrative scale (easy to difficult)
Models ranked: 1) Stand Alone, 2) Independent, 3) Hybrid, 4) General.