

Interdisciplinarity Focus Group
White Paper
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To: Provost Brad Cook, Interim Associate Provost Bill Byrnes, and the Academic Planning Steering Committee

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Introduction

Southern Utah University's Academic Planning Steering Committee (APSC) is exploring the possibility of redefining itself as a public liberal arts and sciences institution. The Interdisciplinarity Focus Group (IFG) believes that now is an especially opportune time to conduct a thorough review of SUU's vision, mission, and core themes. Dr. Catherine Porter, President of the Modern Language Association, writes, "Some observers believe that this recession, unlike others experienced in academia since the 1950s, threatens to be not so much a period of retrenchment followed by recovery as an opening onto a thoroughgoing transformation of the postsecondary system." SUU should move quickly to become a leader in this transformation.

As part of its review, the APSC has created the IFG to prepare a report on the future of interdisciplinary study at SUU. The IFG has met three times in the past two weeks to discuss (1) the definition of *interdisciplinarity*, (2) the benefits of an interdisciplinary course, (3) the challenges to be met when creating and teaching an interdisciplinary course, (4) the benefits of an interdisciplinary program, (5) the challenges to be met when developing and expanding an interdisciplinary program, and (6) a plan for facilitating and funding interdisciplinary courses and interdisciplinary degrees at SUU.

1. Interdisciplinarity defined

Because standard dictionary definitions of *interdisciplinarity* are vague, and academics disagree about its qualities, the IFG has created a working definition of *interdisciplinarity* for the purposes of this report.

Julie Thompson Klein explains that interdisciplinary learning has a long history, dating back, arguably, to Aristotle, and interdisciplinarity as a concept has been defined over the years in a variety of ways. To illustrate just one of the challenges involved in creating a definition of interdisciplinarity, one might consider the difficulty of

distinguishing interdisciplinary study from multidisciplinary study, transdisciplinary study, or anti-disciplinary study. Klein states, "Interdisciplinarity, in short, has no inherent meaning" (63).

However one defines it, interdisciplinarity points to a deficiency or inadequacy resulting from a strictly disciplinary approach to learning. The separation of learning communities into academic departments, or disciplines, is designed to *discipline* the minds of students so that their acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge and skills prepares them for employment in their chosen field. Interdisciplinarity enhances such learning by creating alternative learning communities, which encourage students to broaden their perspectives and to develop their ability to think creatively.

For this report, the IFG defines *interdisciplinarity* as *the intentionally focused study of a historical period, geographic region, life experience (gender, race, age), or theme from two or more disciplinary perspectives in order to model and foster holistic critical inquiry. The goal of interdisciplinary study is not solely to acquire knowledge; rather, emphasis is placed on integrative, creative thinking and problem-solving skills.*

2. Benefits of an interdisciplinary course

Ideally, the goals of no two interdisciplinary courses will be exactly the same. To provide a relatively brief but still useful description of the benefits of interdisciplinary courses, we might differentiate between the first-year interdisciplinary course and the senior-level interdisciplinary course. Instructors of the former can assume that the student has very limited or no knowledge of a specific discipline's methods of critical inquiry (such as its specialized vocabulary and modes of research, analysis, and evaluation); instructors of the latter can assume that the student is familiar with at least one discipline's theoretical structures and vocabulary and their practical applications.

The benefits of a first-year interdisciplinary course can be summed up in Deborah DeZure's answer to the question, "Why pursue interdisciplinarity?" Her response is, "Simply put: life is interdisciplinary." In relation to most juniors and seniors, the incoming student often brings limited experiences and frameworks of knowledge to the college classroom. The first-year interdisciplinary course therefore serves as a gateway into unfamiliar intellectual territory and, at the same time, presents to the student the complexity of an issue while introducing a variety of ways to think about that issue.

In the senior-level interdisciplinary course, the "disciplined" student learns to appreciate alternative structures of knowledge, to recognize similarities and differences among disciplines, to merge the knowledge and skills of one discipline with another to create new knowledge and skills, and to contribute to the transformation of established disciplines.

Finally, for the university as a whole, an interdisciplinary course encourages faculty members to interact closely with colleagues in other departments and colleges. While

instructors may already occasionally work collaboratively on college and university committees, they rarely, if ever, work together on a deep level on issues of pedagogy and scholarship. Such work creates new, extra-departmental learning communities within the university, communities that will help unite faculty and lead to greater collaboration on a variety of projects.

3. Challenges to be met when creating and teaching an interdisciplinary course

Recent studies on interdisciplinarity reveal that obstacles to the creation of interdisciplinary courses are largely administrative. If faculty course load is not to be increased with the addition of an interdisciplinary course, the number of courses taught within two or more departments will either need to be reduced or courses will need to be assigned to another instructor. In the latter case, the shuffling of duties will inevitably result in dispensing overload or adjunct pay in two or more departments. The assignment of student contact hours to a particular department must also be negotiated, as must the designation of the course prefix and the awarding of credit toward fulfillment of a department's degree requirements. These budgetary and administrative challenges have been overcome by many public liberal arts institutions, Georgia College & State University and Southern Oregon University among them, and the creation and implementation of interdisciplinary courses at SUU should not be hindered by impediments such as these.

Faculty members preparing and delivering an interdisciplinary course will also face challenges. Instructors whose undergraduate and graduate study was done exclusively within traditional disciplinary silos might need to be educated about the value of interdisciplinary courses. Those creating and teaching such courses will also be required to rethink their teaching philosophies as they work closely with other instructors to develop common learning outcomes, lesson plans, and assessment of student learning for the new interdisciplinary course. Tom Drake, et al. explain,

Interdisciplinary humanities courses delivered to first-year students are not for every instructor, even if they find the topic itself intrinsically interesting. These courses require instructors to stretch intellectually, reading and teaching unfamiliar material. This has proved exhausting and can draw valuable time away from one's efforts at disciplinary teaching and research.

Administrative, instructional, and other challenges must be taken into consideration if SUU is to promote the development of interdisciplinary courses.

4. Benefits of an interdisciplinary program

Generally speaking, both the academic community and the public at large are the beneficiaries of interdisciplinary programs. Ethan Kleinberg writes, "The benefits [of an interdisciplinary program] will include the production of knowledge through innovative

scholarship, the creation of working networks across the disciplines and departments throughout the university, and most important, the fostering of an informed and critical public.” More specifically, DeZure lists six reasons to pursue the creation of an interdisciplinary program: (1) “social problems . . . cannot be resolved by a single disciplinary perspective”; (2) a curriculum based on disciplinary structures artificially fragments knowledge; (3) employers want a workforce that can apply learning to a variety of situations; (4) “administrators hope to make more efficient use of resources and equipment by sharing them across disciplines”; (5) disciplines can be transformed by their interactions with other disciplines; and (6) the linear organization of knowledge is being supplanted by networks of knowledge made available electronically.

To support the benefits listed above, the IFG recommends contacting institutions with apparently successful interdisciplinary programs, such as Wesleyan University and West Chester University, to inquire about the benefits their students, faculty, and local community have enjoyed as a result of their interdisciplinary programs.

5. Challenges to be met when developing and expanding an interdisciplinary program

The development of an interdisciplinary program presents challenges similar to those associated with creating a single interdisciplinary course. Administratively, finding funding and addressing problems associated with the assignment of courses to departments and instructors are hurdles that must be overcome, and receiving approval for new major and minor programs, especially in a time of economic hardship, will prove difficult. Some faculty members and students will also need to be educated about the benefits of an interdisciplinary major or minor. Based on models of apparently successful interdisciplinary programs, an academic home—including a director, staff, office space, and budget—will need to be established and maintained if an interdisciplinary program is to operate effectively.

6. Plan for facilitating and funding interdisciplinary courses and degrees at SUU

Currently, SUU offers ten General Education courses designated “Interdisciplinary,” and students are required to take at least one of these courses to fulfill the General Education requirement. These courses have recently been vetted by the University General Education Committee; however, some of them might not meet the definition of interdisciplinarity as established in section one of this document. In addition, SUU has established at least two interdisciplinary programs: Outdoor Recreation in the Parks and Tourism (<http://www.suu.edu/ed/PE/orpt-major.html>) and Agriculture Science and Industry (<http://www.suu.edu/sci/agns/pdf/AG.BIS.requirements08.pdf>). SUU also allows students, in consultation with advisors, to create an individualized Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Study (<http://www.suu.edu/academics/bachelors.html>).

Dr. Briget Eastep, SUU’s Coordinator of Outdoor Recreation in the Parks and Tourism (ORPT), already has experience creating, proposing, and administering a successful

interdisciplinary program at SUU. Her report to the IFG, outlining the ORPT program's successes and challenges, is attached to this document as Appendix A.

It is the opinion of the IFG that institutional requirements for an interdisciplinary course designation be clearly established and communicated to faculty and students, and the goals and assessment of the interdisciplinary courses be closely monitored. To that end, we recommend that SUU prepare a document similar to West Chester University's "Handbook for Interdisciplinary Courses," located at http://www.wcupa.edu/_admin/associateprovost/pdf/Interdisciplinary_Course_Handbook.pdf. Moreover, any interdisciplinary program of study must be intentional rather than reactive; that is, a selection of courses must be designated as required for the major or minor in a given interdisciplinary program. However it is accomplished, SUU must establish strong guidelines for its future interdisciplinary courses and degrees, and it must promote a culture that values interdisciplinarity.

The IFG recognizes the value of a strong interdisciplinary program and believes that the potential benefits such a program would afford SUU's current and future students and faculty, and the local community, warrants pursuing the development of guidelines for interdisciplinary courses and, eventually, the institutionalization of an interdisciplinary program.

Recommendation

The IFG recommends the immediate creation of an Interdisciplinarity Committee to study and promote interdisciplinarity at SUU. We further suggest that the newly formed committee consider the following:

Item 1: (A) The Interdisciplinarity Committee (IC) should consist of no more than five members from across campus so that its work can be concentrated and goals can be met quickly; the IC should also work closely with the Experiential Education Committee and the University General Education Committee. (B) The IC should study current scholarship on interdisciplinary study, and it should investigate interdisciplinary courses and programs at other institutions, including SUU's new peer institutions. (C) Based on its findings, the IC should set up strong interdisciplinary course guidelines, formulate a three- or five-year plan for the establishment of interdisciplinary programs, and lay the groundwork for a culture of interdisciplinarity at SUU. The IC should complete this work by the middle of Summer 2010. Realizing the goals of Item 1 will have no budgetary impact.

Item 2: (A) Select, from among current SUU faculty, a part-time Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, whose duties will be modeled on those of the Service Learning and UGRASP directors' duties. (B) This director should conduct research and, in consultation with all of SUU's colleges, the ACDC, and the Provost's Office, prepare a plan for developing an academic program and funding model for an Office of Interdisciplinary Studies, which will be housed in the newly created University College.

The planned program should support SUU's Vision, Mission, and Core Themes. The part-time Director of Interdisciplinary Studies should complete her or his assignments by the end of the Spring 2011 semester. If the director is given a two-course teaching reduction per semester, the estimated cost of Item 2 will be approximately \$10,000 (for the pay of adjunct instructors to cover the director's classes and for incidental expenses); this cost might be covered through grants such as the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant.

Item 3: (A) A full-time Director of Interdisciplinary Studies should be hired to oversee a fully funded and staffed Office of Interdisciplinary Studies, which would operate within the University College. (B) The Interdisciplinary Studies Office's charge should be to establish, promote, and facilitate SUU's interdisciplinary majors and minors, as well as all of the individual courses designated as interdisciplinary. The Office of Interdisciplinary Studies should offer at least three interdisciplinary minors beginning in Fall 2012. These minors should emphasize features unique to SUU, such as the nearby public lands, the Utah Shakespearean Festival, and local native American cultures. The expertise of current SUU faculty should also be considered as interdisciplinary programs are developed. The cost of Item 3, which would require a fixed budget, should include a director's salary and benefits (\$80,000), an administrative assistant's and advisor's wages (\$40,000), operating expenses (\$5000) and grants for faculty who develop interdisciplinary courses (\$5000), for a total of \$130,000. Funding might come from a percentage contribution from each college's program fees, from a separate student fee, or from a donor whose name would be associated with the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Provost's proposed Experiential Learning Requirement "weave" is based upon the pattern of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinary courses, while not always experiential, will provide necessary connections among the ELR's vertical "engagement" threads (civic, global, leadership, outdoor, and creative and innovative) and the horizontal "emphases" threads (undergraduate research, service learning, internships, honors, and individualized learning). The promotion of interdisciplinary study at SUU will enhance student learning, encourage faculty collaboration, and foster community involvement. As Klein notes, "Interdisciplinary practices arise from different motivations and have different trajectories. Yet, their cumulative force has made boundary crossing a major factor in shaping contemporary knowledge" (80). However it takes shape, a successful program of Interdisciplinary Studies at SUU, aligned with the University's Vision, Mission, and Core Themes, will cultivate new ways of thinking. Such thinking will become increasingly valuable as communities—local, global, academic, etc.—become increasingly diverse and interconnected.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Outdoor Recreation in Parks and Tourism at Southern Utah University: An Interdisciplinary Example

In responding to the Interdisciplinary Focus Group's (IFG) White Paper dated Dec 2, 2009, I feel it is important to convey the experiences of an interdisciplinary degree at SUU, Outdoor Recreation in Parks and Tourism (ORPT). I will briefly describe the ORPT program, and discuss its successes and challenges in terms of an interdisciplinary degree.

Program Description

The ORPT Program is in its 7th semester. We have roughly 50 declared majors and 12 graduates (ten of which are working in the Outdoor Recreation field). The major requires 53 credit hours spread among the following course prefixes: ORPT (25 credits), PE (6 credits), NR (6 credits), BIOL (3 credits), GEO (4 credits), and HRHM (9 credits). The original Board of Regent's ORPT Degree proposal was supported by regional public land agencies, private outdoor recreation tourism organizations, and wilderness therapeutic/education organizations. The support came in hopes of SUU educating a more qualified and higher quality outdoor recreation workforce for the region. Many of these organizations have continued to support the ORPT Program by providing practicum and internship opportunities for ORPT majors and minors. A 30 hour practicum is required in ORPT 1000: Intro to Outdoor Recreation in Parks & Tourism, and a 450 hour, 9 credit internship (ORPT 4890) is required for all majors (minors complete an 80 hour, 3 credit internship).

Interdisciplinary Successes

1. The interdisciplinary nature of the ORPT degree has made it a sustainable degree program. Drawing from courses across campus created a unique degree plan that required the addition of only one full time assistant professor and one adjunct faculty. It has been a benefit to the Biology, Geology, and Hospitality departments with an increase of students in the above mentioned courses.

In preparing a proposal for curriculum changes, again I am taking an interdisciplinary approach and I believe I can create three distinct tracks (Public Lands Leadership, Outdoor Education, and Outdoor Recreation Tourism) by drawing on established

courses from across campus and proposing only three new courses that can be taught with the resources we currently have.

2. Students have been able to view and learn about their potential careers in Outdoor Recreation through different disciplines. A future Recreation Planner at a public land agency is able to look at recreation planning through Outdoor Recreation, Natural Resource, Natural History, and Hospitality Management perspectives.

3. Students have been given the opportunity through an interdisciplinary approach to develop a broad base of skills and knowledge.

Interdisciplinary Challenges

1. In relation to students learning from distinct disciplines (ORPT, Natural Resources, Biology, and Hospitality Management), some students do not have the core Outdoor Recreation discipline knowledge to be able to apply Natural Resources, Biology, and Hospitality to their future careers. Some students in their senior year see the method and purpose behind the requirements, but many freshman and sophomore students often ask, “why do I have to take that course?” This is partially a course sequencing issue and is summarized in the IFG White paper’s discussion on the difference between first-year interdisciplinary courses and senior-level interdisciplinary courses.

2. The interdisciplinary approach has short changed students in acquiring essential disciplinary knowledge. For example, a student with public land management aspirations would benefit from more biology and natural resource planning courses than hospitality courses. This challenge has been addressed through substituting courses for individual ORPT students, so ultimately their education serves their futures. Another potential solution, that would require additional faculty, would be to create discipline specific courses. This would decrease the interdisciplinary requirements of the degree, but may offer our students a more obvious focus to their studies.

3. As the coordinator, it has been a challenge to coordinate the curriculum changes and track the offering of the courses and to be able to offer ORPT majors a consistent “track” to follow. For example, over the course of the last three academic years three different professors have taught BIOL 2000, each with a different emphasis and purpose. These changes have made it hard to track the curricular implications for a key knowledge base component for ORPT graduates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wanted to share the experience of the ORPT program as an interdisciplinary degree. Ultimately, the interdisciplinary nature of this degree has allowed SUU to house a sustainable program with minimal resources by utilizing relevant courses across campus. To improve the ORPT program in the future, I want to keep its interdisciplinary nature, but improve students’ ability to benefit from this approach by educating ORPT students in understanding and utilizing interdisciplinary skills so they are able to integrate the disciplines into their future careers, think creatively, and problem solve from different perspectives.