

Academic Planning Summit, Jan. 30, 2009

Themes from Session Topic 2

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First, must define, understand and communicate all the dimensions of the term “interdisciplinary”

- A misunderstood, or variably interpreted, term - many ways to think about combining disciplines: multi, inter, trans – need to understand, educate the community, and ultimately utilize all models
- Many perspectives are required to solve today’s problems – must form commonalities to achieve greater perspectives; scholars today must not just be interdisciplinary, but *interdependent*

General Education Program needs serious re-vamping

- Students hate it – they are uninspired, but they aren’t just bored, they are confused.
- We must increase our expectations of students and demand more of them
- Curriculum should be *problem-focused*, not menu-driven. Must teach problem-solving behaviors - identify the problems of today and work from there
- *Integration* of knowledge should be the focus, not knowledge acquisition
- Must create students who work better in teams and know how to engage in collaborative learning – need a shared sense of ideas and concepts
- Must find problems that people *care* about - Students need some enthusiasm about learning, not just meeting education requirements
- Outreach is vital part of any plan and must be revived - Science and advocacy must be interrelated in the curriculum.

Graduate Student Education is key

- what opportunities exist for TAs to help with interdisciplinary teaching? Increase opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary research
- Must provide more flexibility for grad. committees and major professor

- provide solid background in one discipline for grad students, then enable them to work with others, e.g., integrated learning teams of students
- Students learn best when applying learning – interdisciplinary team formation must be encouraged

Interdisciplinary work will not occur unless it is identified as a priority, with accountability and someone in charge for making sure it occurs

- There is no *infrastructure* here that supports or recognizes interdisciplinary work – institutionalization and firm commitments must be in place from administration
- Must insist on an infrastructure and environment for learning that encourages independent exploration, discovery, and research – *accountability will lead to sustainability*
- *Joint appointments* need to be more formally recognized, and professors must be allowed time to learn interdisciplinary connections
- Empower programs to conduct thoughtful, exploratory research – reconfigure research expectations
- Must have an advocate, a voice, an avenue to pursue formal interdisciplinary work – must be more communication between administration and faculty

Use the “T” Model as a guide in developing interdisciplinary programs

- There is a dilemma with balancing *breadth versus depth* of learning – both students and professors learn topics at a “shallow” level in order to cover more material – need ways to ensure the depth accompanies the breadth of interdisciplinary work
- Fear that professors will not cover their own disciplines because they are digging shallowly at other disciplines – must provide professors teaching interdisciplinary courses or conducting interdisciplinary research *more time to learn* new disciplines
- Must ensure “deep” learning occurs – needed to understand broader meaning of problems, and then share with others

Communication and interdependence between programs must be encouraged

- Departments should be provided *incentives* to communicate with each other, and there should be incentives that make interdisciplinary explorations a normal, regular part of work
- There must be more links between campuses, and there must be more opportunities for graduate students to communicate with each other and with faculty
- Areas of excellence and expertise must be able to connect, share ideas, and have an understanding of a common set of ideas

- Partnerships must be able to be sustained – long term plans must always be included in their development.
- Bring in private sector – interact more with the outside world
- *Interdependence is key to interdisciplinary sustainability*

Models and Ideas

- Create “URI Center for Interdisciplinary Solutions”
- Women’s Studies program – is interdisciplinary by definition
- Coastal Research Center – Coastal Institute – build on our excellence in marine affairs -
- Themed semesters, e.g., “ocean theme” (include arts and humanities, not just sciences)
- Create themes/programs of integration: e.g., multiculturalism, sustainability, etc. – build from there – link to learning centers. “Human Rights Program,” e.g. (includes WMS, AA Studies, etc.)
- Offer certificate courses – J-terms (e.g., 4-credit courses)
- Institute freshman seminars – small group interaction

A shared vision for URI

- Get people together to define the unique concepts and tools that unite us here at URI. Identify unique strengths of our University and build on our strengths – can’t do it all, but URI has areas of excellence
- Determine interdependence of 3 priority areas identified by Provost, review URIs unique strength areas, and then define the concepts , the tools, the “cable” that unites them – build from there
- Sanction regular conversations - Faculty must recognize they have the power to make change – create regular forums for faculty to explore connections, ideas, and collaborations – barrier is not money, it is risk-avoidance, inaction, and lack of appropriate priorities
- *Every program/person/position must be sustainable.*