

## Academic Planning Summit

January 30, 2009

Session # 2 Session Name: How can we better encourage and promote interdisciplinary learning, research, scholarship, and creative work of faculty and students that directly engage some of the major challenges and opportunities facing humanity in these times?

Session facilitators: Michael A. Rice (rice@uri.edu)  
Bradley Moran (moran@gso.uri.edu)

Session note takers: Joanna Senay (reddwriter629@gmail.com)  
Adrianne Henderson (ahenderson@rwu.edu)

The notes to be captured on this report should reflect a set of recommendations based on group consensus.

### Group's Consensus/Recommendations:

Participants struggled with the idea of whether interdisciplinary (ID) education was “right” for URI. Some questioned “what students ultimately get out of working in an ID program”. Many felt that URI has historically been receptive to working in an interdisciplinary fashion. Others felt there have been “gross inconsistencies” or “disconnects” between the faculty and administration on the topic of ID studies. One faculty member felt the Academic Summit was geared more to the student affairs division on URI than to the faculty/staff.

Almost all in attendance agreed that communication between disciplines and departments is exceedingly important, and that the university should be looked at as a holistic experience for its students. Participants wondered what exactly goes in to creating an ID environment. The participants who were most well versed in the models of ID learning were “new” faculty and staff members. They seemed willing to experiment and create something different, whereas a few members of the faculty that have been at URI for many years seemed at a loss as to how they would include other disciplines within their own.

Recommendations coming out of the session are grouped as follows:

(1) **ASSESS** the current situation for interdisciplinary initiatives in terms of:

(a) current models in different areas (learning, research, outreach etc)

(b) barriers to sustainability or initiation (both micro-barriers in departments or colleges and macro-barriers at the institutional or community/state level)

(c) incentives for sustaining current models and eliminating barriers

(2) **EXAMINE** Infrastructure on campus - what are systems in place for things like grant identification, application and management; space for collaborative

projects; support for student exploration and learning, etc. (for example, research office for identifying grants; space is a problem for projects like underwater archaeology who have a group but no place for their lab; IDP is there for faculty education but no clear Gen Ed mandate for students etc)

(3) **COMMUNICATE** more efficaciously by developing, nurturing and maintaining:

(a) a more energetic, active and up to the minute online calendar, set of different, interest driven forums for faculty interaction and LIST OF those forums. For example, the web site should have a section for faculty that is updated daily, like Today at URI or something, or this week at URI, that is visible and easy to access; and maybe faculty could start blogs for different interdisciplinary interests and a list of such blogs could be kept current in a space on the faculty section of the web etc. so anyone WITH those interests can follow them

(b) more spaces for casual and accidental face to face meetings among faculty - coffee shops ,faculty lounges in big teaching buildings, etc. The success of Honors in our day was offering couches, coffee and computers to students. Faculty have computers but give them some couches and coffee (they can pay for it) and let the ideas bubble up!

## **Notable Issues, Questions, Challenges:**

### **Questions:**

What is Interdisciplinary (ID)? Is it the same as Multidisciplinary?

What goes in to creating an ID environment? Whose responsibility is it to assess and develop ID programs? Are the Vice-Provosts already doing this?

Does the idea of ID help the university as a whole?

Is ID an internal or external collaboration, and does it have to be an either/or proposition?

Are there are limits to ID? Can every field work well collaboratively?

What is the policy regarding Gen-Eds that don't necessarily remain entirely specific to one discipline and who teaches these courses?

Creating new fields of learning may be difficult when students are already carrying full schedules. Will the courses be at specific levels that require prerequisites and will we have "experts" to take on ID courses?

Is ID work an asset to getting funds or not?

Can we compete with private institutions like Carnegie Mellon and Columbia, and is this realistic? Do we have the existing capacity to function as an ID institution and/or can we create space dedicated to ID learning?

Is research being overstated rather than scholarship? Can we consider or create an umbrella term that will encompass both?

### **Suggestions:**

Learn what each discipline within the university does and have an appreciation of each discipline and its professional culture before attempting to create this ID model.

Recognize and celebrate that 'research' also includes the humanities (e.g. English & Art are ID) these areas cannot be overlooked as they have strong connections to research and rather large business.

Review cases of ID programs to determine what worked and what did not, as valuable information can be obtained from both successes and failures. Assess them on both micro and macro levels: micro-departmental issues, macro-grant management & incentives.

ID programs (is: President's Partnership program) must work from a "bottom-up" concept, and realizing that what looks like it produces no clear benefits or resources can still be valuable sources of information for further implementations.

Creating different, ID Gen-Eds that would foster connection between disciplines.

Increase the utilization of Senior Research Grant Assistants to aid faculty members in producing research-based funding for the university. Many faculty members did not know the SRGAs existed as there is no clear communication between departments.

Create a sustainable collaboration process for ID programs. Assuming little or no administrative support, maintaining a consistent level of commitment from faculty is crucial to any program's success.

Create ID, team-based majors/minors (such as the new American Studies program).

Reproduce for faculty (on a smaller scale and a more frequent basis) what the Academic Summit was created to do. Schedule coffee hours once a week to connect with other faculty members, exchange ideas and generally become more aware of what others are doing.

Create an office or committee to cut through "red tape" the support structure to allow unimpeded flow of information (such as an Interdisciplinary Academic Research Committee).

Utilize the creation of new buildings and office spaces as venues to promote ID programs to better engage faculty and students.

Review and assess policies that are in place but no longer work in the new ID model.

Assess Freshman ID seminars to maintain the level of engagement and enthusiasm they seem to have coming in to the university that doesn't seem to relay to the following years.

Organize a faculty-level research interest group to address curricular departmental issues.

Acquaint incoming or new faculty with existing faculty as an opportunity to relate ID program ideas.

Move back toward a more research-based emphasis as they faculty in attendance felt the focus has recently become more teaching-centered.

**Implement strong leadership for ID programs at the grass roots level.** Externally, private institutions are utilizing experts in particular fields in conjunction with their ID programs to connect their students with the larger community outside the university.

**Bring in new hires with ID knowledge and skills.** For example: The University of Michigan has a program which emphasizes joint appointments for faculty. ID has to work outside the institution, in the community, at other schools and with external foundations.

**Examine the university's infrastructure to determine if we are set up to create these ID programs at present or what needs to be in place to insure we are in the future.**

Communication is **key**. Embrace innovations and strategies that recognize the value of both accidental and structured encounters between faculty, staff and students.

Centralize accreditation information on the staff's accomplishments and affiliations.

Create a central calendar (on the web page) to post daily events and information.

Faculty asks that the administration must "admit they are having problems and ask for help". The faculty attendees felt they are being underutilized by administration as resources for information.

More transparency is needed throughout the university in all areas and departments.

Recognize that budget issues are not peculiar to URI alone, and that funding in higher education is very tenuous everywhere, so realism is needed.

There must be a realistic assessment of barriers and recommendations before anyone should move ahead so efforts are not unnecessarily duplicated. A point-person should be appointed from each department to maintain continuity.

There needs to be greater work load equity and transparency in the work load assignment process.

**Revise General Education requirements to be interdisciplinary; the Curricular Affairs Committee**

### **Barriers, as seen by participants:**

Participants questioned the drastic reduction in state funding and the "panic" that creates among administration.

Many felt that similar ideas had been broached before and that too much focus is placed on recreating what works, rather than correcting what does not work.

Many participants felt URI's "aging" faculty compromises the ability to work between disciplines.

A lack of social spaces for faculty and workload inequities was identified as creating a barrier to ID success (i.e. - lack of 'accidental' meeting spaces and online access to ideas that are brewing)

Faculty sees little assistance coming from the administration with regard to obtaining collaborative grants.

The Graduate school was identified as a barrier by most attendees who felt that anything deemed new "grinds to a halt". The participants also felt the Graduate school tuition rate was far higher than other local institutions and wondered what could be done to make URI more competitive on that issue.

Lack of accreditation for teachers who may want to team teach upper level courses can prevent ID/collaborative work.

Most faculty members seemed highly opposed to the idea of adjuncts or the "revolving door" instructors who are currently teaching classes. Many felt administration should be tapping in to hidden expertise that faculty may possess to alleviate this issue.

Several participants referred to being discouraged with the process of the summit and felt they were better off operating in their own "silos" to maintain the autonomy they currently experience.

Some attendees felt the creation of Living/Learning communities was contrary to the idea of ID scholarship. They observed that by "funneling" freshman in to constructed groups consisting of students from only their major, students will not have any ID contact with peers.

Some attendees felt that workload inconsistencies within and across colleges is seen as a barrier to cooperation

Some attendees felt a disjunction between administrative encouragement of interdisciplinary work and departmental ambiguity or hostility - which discourages new and young faculty from taking risk (and the related worries about professional standing among younger faculty who are both inclined toward interdisciplinary collaboration but also worried about being penalized by traditionalist senior colleagues)

It was observed by one participant that in the very prelude to this workshop, the Provost alluded to the faculty are being under worked: if we are not on campus - we are not working ("these workshop organizers were meeting in January when everybody else was off skiing"). Myth perpetuation should be checked to build good morale.

## **Notes, Themes Trends:**

Overall, the session had a contentious and fractured tone to it from the start as is frequent in discussions among faculty from different disciplines. Many attendees were unable to connect how the idea of ID learning with what they currently do in the university. Many of the participants were unclear about the ID model in general, which made it difficult to begin significant plans. Much of the discussion was centered upon first-person issues with the institution, but there were some clear-cut ideas and suggestions discussed as well.

At the end of the session, there were no clear plans to implement any of the suggestions or ideas raised by the attendees. As of 12:05 pm, no committees or groups were formed as a result of the session. However, it was recognized that The Faculty Senate Curricular Affairs Committee and the Council for Research could be more proactive in promoting a faculty-centered ID agenda.