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Panel presentation by

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Director of Interdisciplinary and Innovative Initiatives

This position was created in 2011 to help implement Goal 2 of the Graduate School Strategic Plan: Enhance the culture of innovation and interdisciplinarity in graduate education. The specific strategies of that goal include:

- I. supporting efforts to provide interdisciplinary opportunities for students
- II. increasing the number of interdisciplinary certificates and programs
- III. supporting faculty applying for training grants
- IV. providing interdisciplinary space for meetings and collaboration

Challenges to interdisciplinary training at the University of Georgia

The challenges to interdisciplinarity that I see at UGA and beyond are primarily institutional / structural - or - ideological / epistemological. Those that are ideological or epistemological typically manifest at the level of individual collaborators or programs. Given the goals and nature of this retreat, I will focus on those that are institutional/structural for today:

- I. Faculty and students find themselves "work[ing] laterally across a typically hierarchical organization" (Boden et al. 2011:742).
 - a. Reporting lines for interdisciplinary programs are either non-existent or very confusing.
 - b. Without clear lines of responsibility, it can be difficult to cobble together resources. Program directors are forced to repeatedly beg for resources from multiple sources, even though they have proven that they can bring in some of the university's strongest students.
 - c. Without "control" of faculty members, program directors may find it difficult to staff the courses that their students need.
- II. Faculty members may find it very difficult to participate in interdisciplinary training programs because of the demands of tenure and promotion (Campbell 2005, Boden and Borrego 2011). They are often faced with P&T committees that do not understand and cannot properly evaluate their work, they publish in journals that may be unfamiliar to discipline-based committees, and they may have more collaborative work and more co-authored publications than their peers.
- III. Faculty members can also find it difficult to engage in pedagogical approaches that are particularly appropriate to interdisciplinary training, such as co-teaching, because of how we count course credit here.
 - a. Having multiple instructors fully engaged in designing and delivering curriculum is frequently the most effective way of ensuring that students are exposed to multiple,

- sometimes competing, perspectives on critical topics. In courses where multiple instructors partition duties both in and out of the classroom, it is reasonable that they share course teaching credit. In instances, though, where two or more instructors are present for each class and each contribute full effort to designing and preparing the course, the availability of only partial credit serves as a deterrent to participation. This is particularly true for junior faculty members who may not have additional hours banked and may find themselves teaching overloads to satisfy teaching requirements.
- b. In recent discussions with National Science Foundation program officers about what constitutes the most effective institutional commitment for training grants, one pointed out: "the one thing that no one has figured out to our satisfaction is how to encourage and support co-teaching interdisciplinary courses."
 - c. Just to get an idea of how much co-teaching is happening at UGA so that we could craft strategies for better supporting it, our office conducted a census of sorts. With the help of OIR, we decided to look just at one term and pulled all the courses that had instructors listed at less than 100%. After a lot of cleaning up, we got in touch with the department heads, and when necessary, the instructors. By the end we had a 100% response rate.
 - i. Of responses received for 278 courses across 49 departments/disciplines, 197 responses (71%) indicated that courses fell within the category described as (1) (multiple instructors serially replacing each other in the classroom); 79 (28%) were reported as falling into category (2) (multiple instructors who are both/all present for all or most of the class sessions); the remaining 4 courses were described as falling somewhere between category 1 and 2.
 - ii. A lot of this is being done within disciplines. So, next we wanted to get an idea of how many of these courses were inter- or cross-disciplinary.
 1. First, we looked at courses that were cross listed. We found only 5 graduate courses that fell under the #2 category
 2. Then looking at courses that were not cross-listed but did have instructors from different home departments, we found an additional 6 courses that were co-taught in the way we were interested in. So, it is likely that there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 11 interdisciplinary co-taught courses each semester.
 - iii. This methodology does have some important limitations.
 1. First, we do not really know if these courses are offered more often in the fall or spring semester, so simply doubling these numbers to arrive at yearly count is probably too simplistic.
 2. Second, it does not capture courses that are being offered through some creative solutions and is likely undercounting the true number.
 3. Third, it does not account for how many more courses might be offered if such teaching was appropriately incentivized.

Opportunities

- I. What I would argue to you is that what is important in interdisciplinary training is not that we nail down "the model" and then imbue every student with that perfect blend of expertise and experience, but rather that we teach students how to learn new things, that we cultivate in them the disposition for doing so, and that we facilitate team work and team learning. It is important that we emphasize not only interdisciplinary courses, certificates and programs, but also "interdisciplinary habits of mind" (Suzanne Ortega, President of the Council of Graduate Schools)
- II. I would also say that while we should not underestimate the importance of even limited exposure to other ideas, we cannot be content with just combining elements from two closely related disciplines. Both an anthropologist and an ecologist may fundamentally believe that the world can be described through models, or they may not. A shared belief on how we can represent the world may make us more likely to understand our respective positionings and languages than does the difference in the systems we study. I would submit to you that you could find two anthropologists of different stripes who have a much harder time collaborating with each other - because of epistemological differences - than they would with a natural or physical scientist who shares their proclivities. And because our epistemologies and methodologies may make us more comfortable with someone in a vastly different field than with someone in our own field, simply encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration is too simplistic. I would encourage anyone committed to interdisciplinary inquiry to seek out someone who challenges your worldview and how you know what you know.

Questions for the group

- I. *Cultivating interdisciplinary habits of mind:* What if every student at UGA did something that forced them to really question their disciplinary world views? What kinds of experiences could we craft for them, and how could we incentivize them to do it? And their mentors to let them do it?
- II. *Facilitating faculty participation:* What can we do in UGA's promotion and tenure guidelines as they are being revised? And what if we allowed programs to hold EFT and not just departments or institutes?
- III. *Providing stable resource lines:* What if we reworked the credit hour funding allocation model so that some of the credit flowed to students' programs instead of only to where the instructor has his or her EFT? That would provide small, hard-wired budgets for interdisciplinary programs -and/or what if we allow them to receive indirect cost return? How can we work interdisciplinary endeavors into major funding campaign initiatives?