

UGA 2017 Academic Affairs Faculty Symposium

Solving the Grand Challenges of Our Time: Empowering Faculty and Preparing Students

Report and Recommendations of the (Building) Vital Communities Group: A Trans-Disciplinary Approach to Teaching, Research, and Service

Suzanne Barbour
Dawn Bennett-Alexander
Markus Crepaz
Ellen Evans
William Finlay (facilitator)
Diana Graizbord
David Okech
James Reap
Hani Safadi
Jerry Shannon
Joachim Walther

Defining Vital Communities

We invested a significant amount of our time together attempting to construct a working definition of “vital communities.” Although our definition is not all-inclusive, we believe that a “vital community” meets its members’ social, emotional, physical, health, environmental and economic needs. Vital communities are diverse, responsive, resilient, inclusive, supportive, equitable, competent, and empowering; they enable their members to connect to one another and to build bridges to the broader communities in which they are embedded.

Guiding Principles

Over the course of our discussions, five guiding principles emerged:

- the building of vital communities must be organic and democratic: community members themselves, rather than outsiders, must build them from the bottom up
- universities should work *with* communities rather than doing anything *to* or *for* them: we are concerned that the phrase, “building vital communities,” implies a pre-eminent role for universities
- the relationship between the university and the community must be an equal partnership: community members are not research subjects

but should be fully engaged participants and community needs should take priority

- the working paradigm for our recommendations has two main themes: (1) vital communities underlie the other four Grand Challenges (global health, safe food and water, domestic and global security, sustainable environments); (2) our efforts should integrate all facets of our tri-part land grant mission, with social relevance being the focal point.
- our recommendations for meeting the Grand Challenges should embrace a trans-disciplinary approach; this involves investigators from different disciplines working jointly to create new conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and translational understandings

Grand Challenges Solutions Program

What is the greatest “challenge” to solving the Grand Challenges of our time?

We believe that one of the greatest impediments to true innovation resides in the failure to leverage existing expertise across highly diverse disciplines. Thus, we use the term “trans-disciplinary” to emphasize our belief that the intellectual future for our scholarship, instruction and outreach lies in the creation of a new intellectual space rather than the simple combination of elements from different disciplines (i.e. inter- or multidisciplinary). The overarching goal of our proposed idea below is to reduce barriers to trans-disciplinary collaborations on our campus.

How can we reduce barriers to trans-disciplinary collaborations?

We propose that UGA establish a Grand Challenge Solutions Program to address socially relevant issues that integrate the five established grand challenges. This program would be comprised of two components: (1) trans-disciplinary courses, and (2) a seed grant program.

What is the curriculum vision for the Grand Challenges Solutions Courses?

The objectives of these courses are to integrate and move beyond discipline-specific approaches and, as appropriate, to include stakeholders from outside the university in teaching them, thereby building research collaborations and modeling contemporary real-world applications for our students. As an example, imagine a course combining social work and engineering that would focus on community infrastructure.

The courses would be co-taught by four-person teams, each consisting of a faculty member and an advanced graduate student from two different disciplines, ideally spanning colleges/schools. We envision that the courses would be offered at the

4000/6000 level, targeting upper level undergraduates and masters level graduate students. The first course in the sequence would be content driven and delivered in conventional formats, whereas the second course in the sequence would apply the content knowledge using experiential learning methodologies within the community.

Parallel programs already exist on the UGA campus, including the FYOS program and, in particular, in the new GS LEAD program, which is an NSF-funded program designed to train doctoral students in problem-solving, interdisciplinary teamwork, leadership, community, and engagement.

How will the Grand Challenges Program *enhance research and scholarship* resources?

As research teams are formed to deliver these trans-disciplinary courses, they will become eligible to compete for the Grand Challenges Solutions Seed Grant Program (GCSSGP), which will be offered on a yearly basis. This program will be similar to the recent 2017 President's Interdisciplinary Seed Grant Program in scope and structure. Importantly, the newly formed trans-disciplinary teams will have demonstrated commitment through the successful delivery of trans-disciplinary courses as described above.

What *resources* will be needed for the Grand Challenges Solutions Program?

It is recognized that all new programs require some initial and likely on-going investment by central campus. First, we believe that it is important to provide incentives for the faculty who will be asked to volunteer to develop classes that are, in all probability, quite unlike any they have ever taught before and will require a substantial commitment in faculty time and effort. Second, this program will require administrative support, including a facilitator who would help to identify and match the faculty who wish to participate in the Grand Challenges Solutions Program. Finally, the ability to offer a yearly seed grant program will require a substantial investment.

However, we strongly believe that the return on investment for our proposed Grand Challenges Solutions Program would extend well beyond the classroom and contemporary instructional excellence. We anticipate that this program would not only enhance grant and contract proposal success but also be attractive to various stakeholders, thereby facilitating fund-raising efforts due to the social relevance focus that will span our land-grant tri-part mission.