Recommendations from the Faculty Senate Task Force on Interdisciplinary Studies

Rationale

At USM there already exist a number of interdisciplinary initiatives and approaches coming from many existing programs such as Osher, Women and Gender Studies, the African American collection, Thinking Matters, ANES, Honors, Russell Scholars, the Religious Studies Minor, Liberal Studies, the Policy institute, and the Duclos Convocation initiative, just to name a few. We have already established at USM a leading model for an interdisciplinary general education core and one college for which interdisciplinarity is already central to its mission. It only makes sense that we utilize the same expertise that goes into these programs in additional major classes as well. The goal of this report is to assess the interest in further interdisciplinary opportunities within the faculty and to summarize both the barriers to this interest (or to the actualization of the interest) as well as suggest structural changes that might promote, strengthen, and further interdisciplinary opportunities at USM.

It is important to realize that by ‘interdisciplinarity’ we do not necessarily mean ‘multidisciplinarity,’ ‘cross-disciplinarity,’ or ‘transdiciplinarity’—all of which can suggest different degrees to which traditional academic disciplines work together while maintaining their individual disciplinary uniqueness. ‘Interdisciplinarity’ is usually reserved “to indicate that two or more
disciplines are being used to solve a problem (or create a problem), explore a problem, comment on a text, or teach a class” and usually suggests “integration of methodologies, theories, contents, and perspectives.” While all of these terms (‘multidisciplinarity,’ etc.) can, in certain contexts, become synonyms for each other, it is necessary to keep in mind the important distinction that ‘interdisciplinarity’ suggests that disciplinary identity is, to some extent, changed or altered by collaboration to help forge a new approach, subject, or goal in research and/or teaching. Some areas of knowledge that have existed for some time—cultural studies or medical engineering, for example—could be said to have always already been interdisciplinary, while an interdisciplinary approach may be used occasionally with anyone’s scholarship depending upon the task at hand. While there are many forms by which complementary and divergent disciplines can merge in the act of learning, relative to this report it is important to realize that what we are proposing is a more sustained attempt to foster interdisciplinarity across the campuses of USM as a way to create opportunities for cutting-edge knowledge and to distinguish USM as an institution. This approach must come only with the knowledge that 1) interdisciplinarity contains certain risks—new approaches might not work or yield results that are helpful for research or pedagogy; 2) interdisciplinarity “complements” disciplines, but does not do away with them or replace them; 3) interdisciplinarity is not cheap and requires new infrastructure as well as a commitment by both faculty and

---

administrators in order to work well. Interdisciplinarity does, however, contain the potential to create new approaches to old disciplines as well as invent exciting new ones.² For many institutions and individuals, it is a risk worth taking.

The development of interdisciplinary studies at USM could have many advantages for furthering new kinds of research and knowledge. In addition, such an approach might help to give the institution more flexibility and speed at developing new programs to meet changing student demands and interests. As the primary institution of higher-learning in the most dynamic part of the state, USM is uniquely situated to foster programs that deliver new forms of content to a large student population. In many ways interdisciplinarity connects education to real-world situations by taking knowledge outside of one discipline and exposing it to multiple perspectives that test the original context for this knowledge. The ability to target opportunities for program growth at USM should be a part of any overall strategy or goal for the institution, and interdisciplinarity could be a part of that plan. What is needed is more coordination of research, collaboration, and instruction for all such programs and the opportunity to develop new ones at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

As a part of an attempt to gather information the task force developed a survey on interdisciplinarity at USM that was sent out in April, 2011, to 663 full- and part-time faculty, resulting, after reminders, in a return rate of

²Strober, 20.
approximately 10% \((n = 70)\). The survey was very brief, consisting of seven questions (please see appendix). The low return rate together with the high percentage (80%) of respondents who reported in answer to question number three that they “currently teach in an interdisciplinary program at USM or use an interdisciplinary approach in any of your teaching” and to question number four (83%) that they would like to teach an interdisciplinary course in the next two years suggests strong self-selection was at play for a pre-existing positive interest in interdisciplinarity. Suspecting that we heard disproportionately from faculty for the most part already motivated and engaged in interdisciplinary work, we thus focused our attention on how further to support this segment of the faculty. The final two questions appeared most germane: responses to question number six, barriers to interdisciplinary teaching, in which the lack of time to develop or teach new classes was the most prevalent response, followed closely by lack of incentives and compensation. In response to question number seven on solutions to increase opportunities for interdisciplinary work the prevalent responses were related to solutions that included more time, rewards, resources, incentives and the availability of opportunities for faculty forums, involvement, and development. Related to this second set of solutions were some suggestions for how faculty could share ideas for courses, such as, for example, a faculty WIKI for interdisciplinary interests.

What follows are our recommendations based upon the survey of faculty as well as our own on-going conversations among ourselves and with our colleagues about what steps we
might take to make interdisciplinarity function better and more comprehensively at our university.

Recommendations

- **Task an administrator (director or assistant provost) and/or faculty committee with the responsibility to oversee the coordination of and act as a liaison and advocate for interdisciplinary matters generally.** In concert with more specific suggestions below, some of the responsibilities might include: 1) setting up and administering resources to augment faculty time to work in disciplines other than their own; 2) working to engage external resources to enhance interdisciplinary work within the University; 3) overseeing a series of colloquia, workshops, and other events throughout the year available to students, faculty, and possibly the community on topics that would develop new programs or augment the curricula of existing ones. (Many current projects, the commencement theme, for example, could be coordinated with these events.); 4) coordinating and implementing new undergraduate and graduate programs (according to the Strategic Plan, which calls for selectively strengthening graduate programs in science and technology while building upon the core mission of liberal arts.)

- **Establish a Center for Interdisciplinary Studies.** At present, there is no actual place for students to go for advising in interdisciplinary matters. An advising
center with staff available on a regular basis is key not only to sustaining our current programs, but to linking students who are interested in interdisciplinary programs to resources. The disparate nature of interdisciplinary programs at USM makes a central physical home especially important. A center could serve as a meeting-place for reading groups, speakers, and social activities associated with a renewed interest in interdisciplinary activity and as a resource center for currently-existing interdisciplinary programs.

- **Develop a system for allowing faculty to create experimental courses across disciplines as a way to test student interest in possible new programs or concentrations.** A new prefix should be adopted, ‘ITD,’ to indicate courses that are being taught across or between departments or programs and that are cross-listed between them. Faculty should be able to apply for and teach these courses with alacrity. Release time and faculty ‘passports’ that allow faculty to travel freely between the borders of colleges, departments, and majors should be arranged by the Office of the Provost, which will also need to work out a system by which departments or programs share credit for courses they offer jointly as well as give faculty credit for interdisciplinary development, teaching, and advising.³ Some of these classes might

---

³ Removing barriers to interdisciplinary work overlaps with many other issues at the University in regards to, but not limited to, program development, long-term goals, faculty portability, the future of graduate programs, etc. The extent to which some of these issues might be resolved for interdisciplinary studies depends upon their being resolved for the University as a whole. We suggest
develop out of upper-level classes in the new Core or from within majors and programs. In colleges or majors where there are few chances for additional programs, faculty might still wish for the opportunity to develop a new class that can be taken by their students as an elective. Likewise, serious thought should be given to developing programs that are based upon a three-semester calendar (fall, spring, and summer) with faculty teaching in any two and the integration of the summer school into the regular academic year, which would allow for more students from outside of USM to participate in a program as well as give interdisciplinary programs more flexibility in how they are offered during the calendar year.

- **Facilitate communication and discussion within USM and develop a community of interdisciplinarity.** It is extremely important that faculty and students at USM have the opportunity to augment any course development with opportunities to meet and discuss interdisciplinary work with people who want to develop programs. Grants for both internal meetings and external talks and colloquia should be offered that allow for faculty to bring in academic experts to share their expertise in interdisciplinary research and teaching as well as opportunities for USM faculty to share their research with each other. Regular
meetings and exchanges of scholarship could be made a part of any participation by faculty members. Funding for this aspect of interdisciplinarity needs to be robust, but may not need to come solely from USM sources. In addition to visiting speakers, funding could go toward releases for course development; summer teaching stipends for three-semester programs; teaching credit for directing independent studies, directed readings, and internships in interdisciplinary studies; and the establishment of a fellows program for both instructors and students who concentrate on interdisciplinary studies.

- **Foster interdisciplinary connections between education courses/minors and disciplinary majors and foci at both the undergraduate and graduate levels across all colleges.** At the undergraduate level, these connections might include cross-disciplinary discussions about pedagogical content and the best ways for prospective teachers to learn it. The latter might include year-round low-residency programs that bring students to USM in the summer but continue their education via on-line technology throughout the rest of the year.

The opportunities for interdisciplinary studies at USM are multifarious. As an urban university with a population that is in many ways dramatically diverse, USM is well-poised to make interdisciplinarity a major part of its distinct identity. We hope that you will consider our suggestions and begin to implement the specific recommendations that we
outline to begin the process of bringing this potential to the fore.

Respectfully submitted,

Shelton Waldrep, Chair of the Task Force, Department of English
Carol Fackler, School of Nursing
Jan Hitchcock, Social and Behavioral Sciences/Lewiston-Auburn College
Gary Johnson, Department of History
Michael Lahti, Muskie School of Public Service
Melody Shank, Teacher Education Department
Michael Shaughnessy, Department of Art (Art and Entrepreneurial Studies)
March ---, 2011

Dear Colleague,

A Task Force on Interdisciplinarity was created by the Faculty Senate in the Fall of 2010 and charged with exploring the use of interdisciplinarity at USM. As we begin our work, we ask you to take part in an assessment of the forms of interdisciplinarity used by faculty. This brief assessment should take no more than 5-10 minutes to complete. Feel free to write as much as you would like.

The task force is defining interdisciplinarity in a way described by Strober (2011): “...situations in which more than one discipline is involved, regardless of the degree of their integration.” (p. 17) Interdisciplinarity may denote integration of one or more of these aspects: methodologies, theories, content and perspectives (Strober, 2011).

Department/School in which you teach:_________________________________________________

1. Greater opportunity for interdisciplinary work has been presented as one desired outcome of USM’s reorganization. What is your vision of interdisciplinarity at USM?
2. Do you currently teach in an interdisciplinary program at USM or use an interdisciplinary approach in any of your teaching? ___yes ___no

If yes, please explain:

3. Would you like, in the next 2 years, to teach an interdisciplinary course? ___yes ___no

If yes, please explain:

4. What do you believe are the rewards of interdisciplinary teaching at USM?

5. What do you believe are the challenges or barriers to interdisciplinary teaching at USM?

6. What solutions would you suggest to increase opportunities for interdisciplinary work at USM?