

University Council on Teaching Report on Interdisciplinary Teaching June 2010

Introduction

The Provost's Office requested the University Council on Teaching (UCT) examine interdisciplinary teaching at Boston College with an eye toward what might be done to encourage more such teaching and what hindrances to it currently exist. During our deliberations we found wide interest in and excitement for interdisciplinary teaching from all segments of the University: students, faculty and administration. We also found a desire for interdisciplinary teaching at all levels, from freshman core to upper level major and even some graduate courses. The UCT discussed this topic at length and met with a group of faculty who are doing or have done interdisciplinary teaching in the recent past. While some believe interdisciplinary teaching can involve a single faculty member teaching a single course, throughout this report interdisciplinary refers to team-taught courses involving more than one faculty member from different departments and/or different schools.

Benefits of Interdisciplinary Teaching

The UCT heard many reasons why interdisciplinary courses are desirable and useful including but not limited to the following:

- Upon leaving the classroom Boston College students (and all of us) must integrate material from many disciplines in their daily lives and careers. To some extent academic courses restricted to a single subject area are anomalies when compared to real-world experiences. Interdisciplinary courses help students be better prepared to integrate diverse subject areas and to think more broadly. Even many businesses have found it beneficial to use management teams specifically assembled from people of different backgrounds so they can interact and come up with new solutions and new approaches.
- Faculty and students find truly interdisciplinary courses fun and challenging. Without exception, faculty find that working with colleagues from other departments and disciplines an invigorating and enjoyable intellectual experience, exposing them to new ideas and creative ways of thinking. Students, too, indicated that such courses made them think in new ways.
- A great many opportunities exist at BC for more interdisciplinary interactions. For instance, a large population of students double major and/or minor in different subject areas, but few opportunities exist for them to link these majors and minors together. In addition, many of our students go on service trips in the US or abroad or participate in study-abroad programs. Using these experiences to segue into a variety of interdisciplinary courses could help students increase what they get out of both the trips and the courses.
- Students who are writing papers in interdisciplinary courses would be exposed to different writing styles in different specialties and critiques from faculty in different disciplines. Existing campus resources like the BC Writing Fellows Program could be used or expanded to support interdisciplinary writing projects in these classes.
- Interdisciplinary teaching is a potential means to develop and expand learning communities such as Portico in the CSOM.
- Faculty teaching interdisciplinary courses with colleagues are required to think carefully about their teaching and develop paradigms to get their material across to those with diverse backgrounds. This alone would undoubtedly help promote better teaching at BC and more teaching creativity.
- Getting faculty from different disciplines together to teach courses in areas of mutual interest will undoubtedly lead to increased interdisciplinary research collaborations among the faculty. It will also facilitate a better appreciation of our colleagues in other departments and their roles at BC.

Problems encountered with respect to interdisciplinary teaching at BC and suggested “solutions.”

The UCT found that three broad problem areas act as impediments to increasing the amount of interdisciplinary teaching at Boston College. These include (1) assigning credit for students; (2) faculty workloads and support; and (3) getting people together. These are addressed separately below.

Assigning Credit

Faculty interviewed in our discussions made it very clear that the current method of counting students and assigning student credit hours is a hindrance to interdisciplinary teaching in team-taught courses. Currently, in a team-taught course with two faculty members, each gets credit for one-half the student credit hours; if three faculty are involved, one-third. Since student credit hours are an important measure of faculty productivity, it is difficult for faculty to teach in interdisciplinary courses where they are credited with lower numbers of students. Further, since the number of student credit hours taught by a department is considered in the assignment of resources, we heard time and again that Chairs were reluctant to allow faculty to teach in interdisciplinary courses and thereby lower the number of students taught by the department. Teaching half time in a truly interdisciplinary course likely takes as much or more time and effort as doing a course on your own, particularly during the first year or two while the new course is being organized. Thus, it is difficult for faculty to just add an additional interdisciplinary course to their teaching load, even if they are only teaching in it one-half to one-third time. Also, it is not possible or desirable in most cases to simply double or triple the number of students in an interdisciplinary course so that faculty in these courses can produce the same number of student credit hours that they would have in a course taught only by themselves.

“Proposal”

The UCT proposes that up to three faculty, and their departments, teaching in an interdisciplinary course be awarded 100% of all the student credit hours in this course. Other Universities such as William and Mary have been doing this for at least a decade with great success. Such credit should be given only to a faculty member who fully participates in a course, in other words attends all the classes and is an active participant throughout the course. A faculty member who gives only a few lectures in a course, as valuable as this might be, would not be so credited. It would be up to departmental Chairs to oversee this. Vice Provosts Donald Hafner and Patricia DeLeeuw indicated to the UCT that they thought a policy of crediting 100% for up to three faculty teaching in an interdisciplinary course could be worked out to the satisfaction of all. The UCT will leave the organization of such a policy to the Provost’s Office, but it is clear that the current policy for assigning credit needs to be modified if more interdisciplinary teaching is to take place.

Covering Departmental Courses

Another serious impediment to interdisciplinary teaching is that most faculty are already fully committed to teaching core courses, undergraduate courses required for majors and needed graduate courses. It is difficult for them to drop one of these and substitute an interdisciplinary course, particularly if core and departmental requirements remain as they are now. Most departments do not have many “excess” electives and therefore Chairs are reluctant to have faculty drop a required course to add an interdisciplinary course. Several faculty mentioned that they wanted to participate in interdisciplinary courses but were asked, “then who will take over your major’s course?” Some faculty have voluntarily added one-half to one-third of an interdisciplinary course over and above their normal loads, but this is generally an exception and not a long term solution to adding additional interdisciplinary courses.

“Proposal.” The UCT feels this is likely one of the most difficult problems to solve but offers the following two suggestions: First, requirements for both core and undergraduate majors need to be reexamined in light of the need to encourage more interdisciplinary teaching. We are not sure how to get departments to do this other than to ask the Deans to encourage such reevaluations. Clearly, now is a good time to do this, as the University converts to the credit-based graduation system. This system allows for greater flexibility and there are likely increased opportunities of offering interdisciplinary courses in other than the 3-credit per course mode. We call upon the Deans to

promote such thinking among departments. We also strongly encourage the Core Curriculum Task Force to look toward a greater inclusion of interdisciplinary courses in the core. The UCT would like to see a goal for the core, accomplished within five years, of establishing and incorporating enough interdisciplinary courses so that undergraduate students could be required to take one-quarter to one-third of their core requirements from a list of courses designated as interdisciplinary. However, it is hoped that if more interdisciplinary courses can be encouraged and taught, and as more faculty get involved in them, that perhaps the above problem may gradually evolve to be less of an issue, once the faculty push to have their courses become part of various requirements.

The second suggestion is to offer incentives and support to faculty and departments to encourage increased interdisciplinary teaching. Departmental support might take the form of funding a few lecturers to cover needed courses for faculty who want to engage in new interdisciplinary teaching efforts. Perhaps funds for increased interdisciplinary efforts could be given to the Deans who might want to use them competitively between departments to spur more interest.

Many faculty we spoke with indicated that one of the most time-consuming parts of interdisciplinary teaching is the initial organization involving faculty from different departments. Several felt that the time to organize a new interdisciplinary course was greater than that needed to make a new course entirely on their own. Thus, special incentives are needed for faculty, particularly for the first year during course development. Incentives might take the form of partial release time from other teaching duties or additional financial support, particularly during the summer. The UCT agrees that encouraging interdisciplinary teaching is important and will actively promote interdisciplinary teaching proposals from now on via the TAM grant program. Additional resources may also be available from other venues in the University, such as grants from the Institute for Liberal Arts.

Getting Faculty Together

Faculty tend to work largely in their own departments and areas of specialty and there are few mechanisms currently at BC to get faculty from different areas to interact academically. Thus, it is often the case that faculty in different departments may share an interest in some academic area but not know each other or not know about this mutual interest. Therefore, it's difficult for them to get together to consider the possibility of doing a joint interdisciplinary course. Often the more diverse their academic areas, the larger this problem becomes. Yet the more diverse their specialties, the greater impact a joint interdisciplinary course could have. The UCT feels this is a very real problem at Boston College and a great deal more needs to be done to get people together from diverse academic areas.

"Proposal" Coming up with ways to get faculty together at Boston College to discuss academic areas of mutual interest and the potential for interdisciplinary courses may be difficult. First of all, the University will need to clearly communicate to faculty that there is a real desire to promote interdisciplinary teaching at all levels and that the administration is working to eliminate related roadblocks. Departments must be willing to accept interdisciplinary courses toward major requirements and some interdisciplinary courses will need to count toward the Core. When this occurs, we believe many faculty will welcome the opportunity to explore interdisciplinary teaching opportunities. The UCT found there is no one clear model for bringing faculty together. One suggestion is to hold "Dover weekend" conferences on broad topics that might be of interest to many faculty for potential interdisciplinary teaching areas. It was even suggested that a Dover conference be held with senior faculty from different areas invited to discuss how best to approach the issue of getting faculty together. This might also help reinvigorate the Dover conferences: it's been difficult lately to get many faculty to attend weekend conferences.

The method that garnered the most support within the UCT is to organize a series of luncheon or afternoon panel discussions on topics that could promote interest and interaction between a number of faculty. Topics suggested included "War and Peace," "The Human Genome Project and its Significance," "Ethics" "Poverty," "Sustainability" and "The Environment." We envision that a panel of invited faculty from different academic areas would lead each session, explaining how their specialty understands and approaches the issue at hand, with ample time for further discussion. It is likely that a designated leader would be needed to get the panel together and organize the session. It was also thought that a noted expert from outside BC on some aspect of the issue could be invited as a

keynote speaker to act as a draw. The names of those attending would be circulated to all attendees, and it would be clearly stated at the session that it was hoped that those attending might be willing to consider getting together to explore the idea of interdisciplinary courses. A follow-up session or social hour would also be planned. If a few such sessions proved successful, then the Provost's Office, perhaps through the UCT, could open the process up so that faculty from across the University could propose organizing such meetings. The funding for these would not need to be large, something on the order of \$10,000-\$15,000 a year might be appropriate, and could go a long way toward helping make such a plan work. The UCT would be willing to initiate a couple of such sessions next year on a trial basis and the ILA already sponsors symposia and conferences of an interdisciplinary nature.

Closing Remarks

The UCT found that there is wide interest in having more interdisciplinary courses at BC from all parts of the University: students, faculty and the administration. Further we feel that a greater number of interdisciplinary courses team-taught by more than one faculty member from different departments and/or schools is desirable and needed at Boston College. We've tried to outline above some of the stumbling blocks to accomplishing this goal and also some suggestions as to how we envision they might be mitigated. The above list of both problems and suggestions is not exhaustive, but hopefully it will serve as a first step toward the encouragement of more interdisciplinary teaching. If more interdisciplinary teaching is to take place at Boston College, however, there needs to be a clear initiative on the part of the Administration to demonstrate that such teaching is desired and will be supported. There also needs to be a commitment to ask departments and the University Core Curriculum Task Force to work toward including more interdisciplinary courses within their requirements.

Addendum

During the UCT's discussions of interdisciplinary teaching a number of specific ideas emerged. These are listed below.

- Develop linking courses
 - In the Core. For instance, if a student takes core courses A and B in different disciplines they would then be eligible to take interdisciplinary course C.
 - Within majors & minors, the same as above. This might be particularly attractive for students double majoring or with specific minors. It should be relatively easy to get a list of students' double major fields or major and minor fields. (We note that a few minors already involve some interdisciplinary courses.)
 - Link follow-up courses with off campus service and or foreign study experiences.
 - Have a senior "Core" experience linking several areas of the core.
- Use the new credit-based system creatively for interdisciplinary teaching. Interdisciplinary courses do not need to be thought of in just a 3-credit mode. The UCT discussed a number of options for offering interdisciplinary courses for 1, 2, 3 or even more credits. Such potential courses are limited only by the creativity of the faculty involved and the departmental or Core regulating bodies.
- Use interdisciplinary courses in freshman advising seminars.
- Use interdisciplinary courses as Senior Capstone experiences.
- Host a BC website that lists all the interdisciplinary courses available so that students can easily find them at registration time.