1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary activities are not intrinsically high-quality programs that automatically deserve protection and encouragement; nor should they be activities that are imposed from the top. Effective interdisciplinary activity grows out of established high-quality disciplinary activities. The power of interdisciplinary activity -- and it can be great -- is in the application of several different approaches to a particular problem. It follows, therefore, that interdisciplinary activities of high quality should be tracked and encouraged in any budget system, regardless of the principles on which the budget system is based. Disciplinary activities also should be protected and nurtured, but the highly disciplinary nature of the administrative structure at The Ohio State University assures their preservation.

2. Defining interdisciplinary activities

Interdisciplinary is a descriptor for a broad range of activities in teaching, scholarship, and outreach and engagement. Creating a concise definition of interdisciplinary that would be useful for activities in each of these three areas is a daunting task. We considered defining interdisciplinary as anything a faculty member considers interdisciplinary. This is a simple approach, but might create conflicts if interdisciplinary activities were encouraged with special rewards. In another simple approach, one might use interdisciplinary interchangeably with interdepartmental. Some adjustment for interdepartmental interdisciplinary activities might be necessary. Further, some interdepartmental activities might not be interdisciplinary. A long list of cross-listed courses provided by the Registrar’s Office convinced us that simple cross-listing of courses would not be an adequate criterion for interdisciplinary teaching.

We decided that for our subcommittee of four the task of defining interdisciplinary research, teaching and outreach was too difficult to accomplish during the summer quarter, or even a much longer time-frame for that matter. We believe that the fostering of interdisciplinary activities is so important that a high-level group of faculty and administrators should be constituted as a Council on Interdisciplinary Activities. Leadership of the Council should reside in the Office of Academic Affairs. We outline some responsibilities for this Council in Section 4.

3. Senate concerns about interdisciplinary activities in a new budget environment

Many of the problems associated with interdisciplinary activities are independent of the kind of budget system. Nevertheless, the kind of budget system we are now considering results in an even longer list of concerns. The list of potential problems for interdisciplinary work under a new budgeting system includes: turf issues such as course ownership or the distribution of DDRS, course duplication, establishing faculty, departmental and college credit for courses and extramural research funding, distinguishing academically important interdisciplinary activities from attempts to
increase enrollment (and thus revenue) with dumbed-down courses, determining how university, college and departmental taxes will be will be assessed and administered, instituting mechanisms for encouraging and rewarding interdisciplinary work, and many others.

4. Using the new budget system to encourage/reward interdisciplinarity

What mechanisms should we use to distribute revenues, costs and credit in a new budget system? Although we did not study systematically current mechanisms used to distribute revenues and credit for interdisciplinary activity, it is our impression that, to the extent that such mechanisms exist at all, they are often ad hoc and ineffective. Any clear principles based on fairness and practicality would be an improvement. Thus, shifting to a new budget system has the potential to improve the current patchwork of mechanisms, and improve our ability to foster interdisciplinary activities. Designing the appropriate mechanisms would appear to require a detailed knowledge of the new budget system. Unfortunately, Budget Restructuring VIII is not sufficiently detailed in its description of the new system to permit the design of the appropriate mechanisms. Even if it were, however, we feel that our subcommittee cannot accomplish that goal within the time allocated.

5. A Council on Interdisciplinary Teaching, Research and Outreach

We recommend the establishment of a Council on Interdisciplinary Activities that is composed of administrators from the Office of Academic Affairs and the Office of Research, deans, center directors, faculty and students. We recommend further that the Council be Chaired by a Vice Provost and administered with suitable staff support through the Office of Academic Affairs and that the Vice Provost designated to lead this Council be a new position. Adding this duty to the tasks of one of the existing senior staff would not result in the visibility required because those individuals are already very busy with other important duties. A high-level Council of this type will send a clear message to the University community that interdisciplinary activity is important and valued by the University. Such a message will be much stronger than that given by another report from another ad hoc committee no matter how clearly the report is worded or how strongly it is supported by the administration. Of course, such a Council would be appropriate no matter what budget system is in place.

The charge to this new Council might include the following:

a. Develop criteria for defining and evaluating interdisciplinary activities in teaching, scholarship, and outreach and engagement.

b. Create a list of all current interdisciplinary activities at Ohio State.

c. Identify barriers and successful approaches to interdisciplinary activities. Publicize best practices in writing and with public forums.

d. Identify resource needs, budget mechanisms and funding sources that will enhance interdisciplinary activities.

e. Clarify departmental and college responsibilities and limitations in devising and executing the
means to distribute credit to individuals, departments and colleges.

Identify strong disciplinary programs at Ohio State that could potentially come together to form high-quality interdisciplinary activities.

6. Concluding comments

The tasks assigned to our subcommittee are so important that a permanent high-level council of administrators, faculty and students should be appointed to carry out these tasks and then to continue to nurture interdisciplinary activity on an on-going basis.

Committee members

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