

Principles and Procedures to Facilitate Academic Innovation

Submitted November 15, 2010 by a Task Force serving at the request of the Provost's Office. The members of this Task Force are:

Andreas Cangellaris
Sally Jackson
Paula Kaufman, Chair
Kristi Kuntz
John Unsworth

Students today expect research universities to offer interdisciplinary programs that address contemporary challenges and prepare them for a changing job market. In order to meet those needs and in order to remain a vibrant educational institution, the University of Illinois must be able to move more quickly and creatively than we are able to do at present.

A particular obstacle to the development of new interdisciplinary programs on this campus, especially at the undergraduate level, is the fact that majors must be granted by a single college. Combined with the current tuition model, this creates a financial incentive structure that effectively encourages units to engage in proprietary struggles over intellectual and curricular turf. Similar issues do not generally arise at the graduate level, perhaps because less tuition is at stake, and perhaps in part owing to the fact that most graduate degrees are granted by the Graduate College. Although we do not recommend constructing a similar structure at the undergraduate level, because the size and variety of our undergraduate enterprise seems to require more distributed administration, we do think that the campus needs to establish some basic operating procedures to facilitate the development of cross-cutting educational programs. Such programs fully represent the richness of intellectual resources that this campus can bring to bear on interdisciplinary problems, and they will help to prepare our students to address those problems.

As a matter of principle, then, we suggest that the proprietary concerns of academic units should not trump the needs of students, employers, or the campus as a whole. However, units should be invited to collaborate in offering courses or curricula in which they have an interest, and they should have ample opportunities to raise intellectual and practical concerns connected with courses or degrees proposed by other units.

In such discussions, it may be a valid objection that a proposed course or degree is duplicative of something that already exists, but the weight of that objection depends on the actual conditions of access and content. The most important is content: if the courses are not actually equivalent in content, then access is irrelevant. Equivalency of content is a matter for the Educational Policy Committee to decide, and in deciding it they may consider intended audience and pre-requisites, as well as syllabi and assignments, among other things.

With respect to access, duplication is a valid objection, provided that students in all units have reasonable opportunities to participate in the existing offering. However, if one unit's courses are effectively unavailable to students in other units, then the mere fact of overlapping content cannot be considered an acceptable reason for forbidding other units from offering courses or curricula in this area—unless additional sections of the existing course can be offered, on terms that reward the unit that provides the instruction.

Likewise, the possibility that a unit may wish to expand its offerings in a particular area at some unspecified point in the future cannot be considered an acceptable reason for preventing another unit from offering immediate proposals in that area, provided that the foregoing conditions have been met.

With those principles in mind, we recommend the adoption of a simple protocol for developing new interdisciplinary programs that cross college boundaries. The purpose of this protocol is to encourage units to collaborate in addressing emerging curricular needs, to align financial incentives with the broadest interests of this campus and its students, to allow all stakeholders to raise legitimate concerns, and to have these concerns evaluated in the context of the broadest interests of the university and its students.

Protocol for Proposing Interdisciplinary Programs that Cross College Boundaries

1. Proposals for educational offerings that cross college boundaries can come from faculty or administrators in those colleges, or from the Senate Educational Policy Committee.¹ Proposals from any source will be shared with the appropriate deans and unit executive officers for consideration and feedback, as described below. All such proposals, and each of the steps described below, should foreground the following criteria:
 - a. Evidence that the proposed program would meet students needs not addressed by existing programs
 - b. Evidence that the proposed program would meet social needs not already addressed by existing programs
 - c. Evidence that the proposed program would meet campus needs not already addressed by existing programs.
2. The proposer of such a program will announce his or her intention through the Council of Deans (using either its meeting or its mailing list) and will invite deans (or through them, their department heads) to express interest in participating in the development of such programs. This announcement will be copied to the chair of the Academic Senate's Educational Policy Committee, and a representative of that Committee, designated by its chair, will participate in subsequent discussions and meetings about this proposal. These discussions should cover financial as well as intellectual matters, and any resulting proposal should address both as well.
3. If the conversations go smoothly and result in a proposal that creates no controversy, the proposal will be presented in due course to the Senate Educational Policy Committee, with the understanding that all interested parties are represented in the proposal, and that silence on the part of others indicates assent.
4. If the invitation does not result in a proposal that satisfies all deans with an interest in the question and if, in the judgment of its Chair, the Educational Policy Committee is unwilling or unable to resolve such disagreements in a six-month period, then a set of three deans with no involvement in the proposal will be selected by a representative of the Provost's Office to review the case and recommend a way forward.
5. If the panel of three deans cannot agree on a way forward, the decision on how to proceed will be made in the Provost's Office.

In order for this process to work, the Council of Deans, the Educational Policy Committee of the Academic Senate, and the Provost agree to be bound by this protocol.

¹ Given its deep involvement in review of programs at the campus level, the Educational Policy Committee has a very good picture of programs and courses at the campus level and it has, in the past, initiated successful proposals for new programs.