

Joint Provost-Senate Task Force on Interdisciplinary Communities

Interim Report

May 2018

The members of our task force are pleased to provide the Provost and Academic Senate with a brief interim report on the work we have carried out during the 2018 Academic Year in response to our charge:

This task force will review current infrastructure, procedures, and needs supporting interdisciplinary communities university-wide, and create a vision along with recommendations for how to achieve this more supportive environment. It will consider issues such as: distribution across campuses, schools, and disciplines for both research and education; issues concerning creation and maintenance of such communities, including communication/information-sharing and transportation; issues concerning financial support; and issues concerning merit review, appointment and promotion.

Vice Provost Elizabeth Graddy, who was invited to address us at our first meeting, emphasized that although our assignment goes beyond interdisciplinary research, a separate working group has been charged with exploring means of improving cross-school teaching. Our task force therefore decided to include an examination of the ways that interdisciplinary research can either arise from or stimulate interdisciplinary teaching, particularly at the graduate level, but not to focus on teaching issues as such. The Vice Provost also stated that our work would be helpful in supporting “convergent research,” as it is termed in the new strategic plan; facilitating integration of faculty across UPC, HSC, ICT, ISI, and CHLA; and promoting communication within and across USC’s various communities.

The task force has been mindful of the fact that previous committees have examined the role of, and impediments to achieving, functional interdisciplinary collaborations in the modern research university over the past quarter-century. Although USC has had, and continues to have, many successes of this sort, the interviews we have conducted with many experienced faculty and with the leaders of interdisciplinary centers have, in effect, stood the old proverb, “success has many fathers, failure is an orphan,” on its head. Our respondents have been quicker to recite the (innumerable) barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration than to provide formulas for success, at least ones that can be generalized beyond the individuals involved.

Some of this may reflect our determination to take seriously the charge that we examine what can be done to support “communities” that span boundaries between disciplines. In our six meetings and numerous interviews, we have looked at and will certainly address the challenges that faculty find in working on projects with colleagues from other fields who have differences not only in methodology and metrics but even in what is considered an appropriate subject of study, we will go beyond that to ask how collaborative projects can actually spawn ongoing communities and what happens to the identification of scholars with their home discipline when their work occurs primarily in such interdisciplinary spaces.

Members of the task force are still conducting interviews and examining the experience at our peer institutions. We expect to finish the interviews and reach conclusions during the fall 2018 semester.

Respectfully submitted,

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