Provost-Senate Task Force on Interdisciplinary Communities

Alex Capron
Provost-Senate Retreat
February 23, 2019
Task Force Members

2018-19
• Ricky Bluthenthal
• Alex Capron (co-chair)
• Ewa Deelman
• Patrick Dent
• Kate Flint
• Jeffrey Gold
• Sofia Gruskin
• Julianna Kirschner
• Jennifer Lewis
• Doe Mayer
• Sheila Murphy (co-chair)
• Kenneth Nealson
• Hector Reyes
• Paul Rosenbloom
• Bill Swartout
• Holly Wills
• John P. Wilson

2017-18
• Antonio Bento
• Devon Brooks
• Alex Capron (co-chair)
• Ewa Deelman
• Patrick Dent
• Kate Flint
• Jeffrey Gold
• Marientina Gotsis
• Sofia Gruskin
• Norman Hollyn
• Doe Mayer
• Donna Spruijt-Metz (co-chair)
• Paul Rosenbloom
• John Slaughter
• Bill Swartout
Conceptual: “Interdisciplinary”

**Multidisciplinary**
- Engagement (perhaps sequential) of scholars from various disciplines
- May seek output that draws on results of analysis from several disciplines ("X perspectives on Y": multiple ways of seeing)
- May address problems that lie between disciplines

**Interdisciplinary**
- Seeks answers to questions that do not have a disciplinary basis
- Requires interaction of scholars from multiple disciplines
- May be foundational (enriching epistemology of disciplines) or instrumental (solving a problem that a single discipline cannot solve) (Wicked Problems)
Activities Affected

Education and Training

- Build on disciplinary education
- Knowledge is not best understood as separate silos
- Range of tools and methods that will be essential in tackling theoretical & practical problems

Separate task force on teaching

**TFIC: teaching as linked to research**

Research and Scholarship

- Some individuals with degrees in more than one field produce interdisciplinary scholarship
  - Use tools from other disciplines to answer disciplinary questions
  - Use tools of several disciplines to answer questions beyond discipline

**TFIC: interested in collaborative activities of multiple researchers**
Conceptual: “Communities”

Use the term to highlight multiple, important phenomena

1. Faculty and students coming together from different disciplines for ongoing conversation not aimed at joint product
   - Reading groups, seminars (often informal; typically not funded)

2. Activities that give rise to ongoing relationships and collaborations beyond a particular “project”
   - Institutes & centers MAY BE communities

3. “Dual Citizenship” for scholars in a diaspora
   - Preserving a sense of connection between department and faculty who work outside in centers based in other departments/schools
Barriers to Interdisciplinarity at USC

• “Interdisciplinary work is for people who aren’t good at their own discipline.”
• In appointment, promotion, and merit review processes, lack of understanding/respect for scholarship published outside the discipline [Not simply a problem of multiple authorship]
• Revenue center management [salary; overhead; space; bureaucracy]
• Tenure-track appointments based in departments, not centers
• Extra burdens for faculty appointed in multiple departments
• Lack of knowledge about faculty outside one’s own field
• Lack of leadership & unsure whom to contact or how to proceed
• Lack of interest (not relevant to one’s research interests)
What Makes Interdisciplinarity Possible?

• Funds (internal & external): recognition of the need

• Supportive leaders
  ➢ More information about expertise and interest of faculty in other depts
  ➢ “Matchmaking” and “publicity” functions
  ➢ Cross-disciplinary funding for post-docs

• Knowledgeable administrators at all levels {overcome bureaucracy}

• Space for collaboration to take place {role of technology in a multi-campus institution?}

• Existence of problems that demand interdisciplinary approach

• Prior success: an existing “community”
TFIC Progress

• Existing literature (including multiple USC reports back to 1990s)
• Qualitative research: interviews with about 20 faculty
• Plans (hopes?)
  ➢ Faculty-wide survey to provide broader data & mapping (by schools)
  ➢ Relative success of disciplinary vs. interdisciplinary research proposals

• Your thoughts and suggestions?
Final thoughts

Perception vs. reality?
- As seen from offices of Provost, VP Research, VP Finance, Deans
- As seen from faculty

One size does not fit all
- Do not want an “ideology” (good scholarship is interdisciplinary vs disciplinary)
Thank you!

acapron@law.usc.edu