**CTAP Spring 2012** Oliver Mayer, Chair Draft #1

**OVERVIEW**

Based on our committee’s interviews and research this year, we find that cross-pollination between can and should be a major priority for the university, that it can be achieved based on actual courses, interconnections and best practices between schools, and that it can and should lead to trans-disciplinary breakthroughs on all levels, including an undergraduate capstone experience that distinguishes USC from our competitors.

Our committee includes expertise from all three USC campuses, from Chuck Gomer (Children’s Hospital) and Sarah Ingersoll (Keck), to Stephan Haas (Physics, Dornsife), Andrew Lakoff (Sociology, Anthropology and Communication, Dornsife), and myself (Theatre). We were also helped greatly by Michael Allison from CET.

Quite early on, Andy coined the phrase “Los Angeles as laboratory” – and it struck a nerve for us. Issues of homelessness, immigration, voting politics, AIDS, cancer and other health concerns affect our entire city and its history. Over and over, we saw the possibility of using the city itself as a shared laboratory for new course work and eventually for capstone experiences. The distance and insularity between our three campuses can certainly be viewed as a challenge to such interconnection, but what we all share is proximity to urban Los Angeles. We see this as a nexus point for our faculty and students to explore and engage in terms of research and potential grants. We envision the development of pilot courses in various disciplines that involve a “lab” experience that brings undergraduates literally into the field.

This year, as Chair, I devised a plan for us to interview several key players at USC with ongoing experience in interdisciplinary course work. We met with Heather Wipfli (Global Health), Geoff Cowan (University Professor, Communication), Manuel Pastor (American Studies and Ethnicity), William Deverell (History).

Our findings are broken into three categories: cross-pollination, best practices, and capstone opportunities for undergraduates.

**CROSS-POLLINATION**:

We identified “means” questions (How to make it easier to cross campuses) and “ends” questions (How to make people want to cross campuses). In general, we identified two large problems – financial and administrative. Cross-university programs, much less single courses, often find their funding in question, and there is a larger question regarding the divvying up of credit revenues between schools. This tends to dissuade true partnership at an institutional level, despite the interests of faculty or students to freely cross-pollinate. Sarah recounted an anecdote: A dean, when approached about a cross-departmental course with an ambiguous revenue model responded: “Our business model is fairly simple: We provide instruction in exchange for tuition.” We think that the Provost might create a mandate reconsidering shared school credit for faculty who collaborate on new courses that interconnect departments and schools. When the revenue question is lifted, then the institutional difficulties are substantially lessened.

We also see that trans-disciplinary institutes are forced to federalize due to a lack of a central administrative infrastructure. We looked closely at Global Health, which is in Heather Wipfli’s words “an application more than a subject,” – with no academic standing per se but with opportunities to cross-pollinate with nearly all schools and majors. Not beholden to any one program, yet with its monies controlled by Keck, Global Health finds itself often hamstrung by the territorial nature of the federated school system. Added to this, Global Health has had no foothold on the University Park Campus, no dedicated space, desks, phones, etc.

In contrast, foundations and institutes such as the Shoah Foundation are completely independent and self-sustaining. Their endowment creates a revenue stream. They have an effective infrastructure and are not reliant on larger administrative bodies. We found other such examples of successful free-standing institutes and foundations within the USC umbrella, including the Center for Public Diplomacy.

**BEST PRACTICES**

In our interviews, we explored kindred ideas – one a top-down directive from the Provost’s Office, and one a bottom-up approach based on the natural academic interests and curiosity of our faculty and students to show us where to put our efforts in cross-pollination.

At the institutional level, we agree with Geoff Cowan, who stressed that a mandate from the Provost stressing co-teaching trans-disciplinary opportunities ought to be both named and publicized in order to stress its importance. Outreach is essential; our committee pointed out that folks from our journalism school could be highly beneficial in the promotion and dissemination of information on trans-disciplinary work at USC.

On a student/faculty level, we also would point up what several of our experts advised: exclusivity is a plus. Capstone experiences are not for everyone, and quality must be maintained in order for this kind of teaching to sustain over time.

Bill Deverell let us know about a highly relevant coming 2-unit course on the history of medicine that will move between campuses and include an array of faculty with wide-ranging interests and disciplines. He expects that the course will begin in Fall 2013; we believe that it should be closely studied for what works and what doesn’t on both the institutional and classroom levels. This is truly interdisciplinary work that will be taught, without much additional investment, by an array of faculty from different schools. To quote Sarah Ingersoll, “the underlying assumption here is that each expert would not require reimbursement for his/her individual contribution.”

Along these lines, potentially good class models include pilot courses (2 and 4 units), micro-seminars, may-mester courses, First Year Investigations, and medical electives. Strong and diverse program models include Problems Without Passports (Dornsife), the Masters in Applied Theatre (Theatre), and the Early Investigator High School Summer Program in Stem Cell Research (Keck).

From such cross-pollinations, we should be actively building bibliographies for posterity, and creating databases involving our connections to LA planning and preservation that might be used for future cross-disciplinary lab work in the city. This “keeping track” directive may go deeper and happen more expeditiously if it comes from the Provost’s office. We have a compendium of untapped information, success stories, exemplary and cautionary tales that – when databased – could be a goldmine for faculty and students searching for interdisciplinary connections.

In the end, the heat comes from the actual faculty and students doing the actual research. Manuel Pastor helped us greatly focus our questions, reminding us that joint research brings people together on very basic levels – storytelling, ethnography, and anthropology. As much as we all desire a Provostial level mandate on interdisciplinary work, he stressed the homegrown grass-roots element of interested faculty and students on the ground level researching their passions.

**CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES**:

The common thread seems to be to identify educational moments that don’t necessarily happen in the traditional way. Non-traditional disciplines often require non-traditional approaches. Still, it is essential to connect our canon of traditional curricula to such trans-disciplinary forays, and to use our considerable institutional heft and expertise towards these ends.

I stress that the best way to prepare our undergrads for a capstone experience is to start early, even before classes begin. The perfect opportunity lies with our Residential College system, and the perfect time to reach international and domestic freshmen is during Fall Orientation. Thanks to the work of Gene Bickers, we have a series of micro-seminars already in place, but with a little planning these can become a way to introduce USC students to interdisciplinary study, and to use their class work to interconnect their interests in ways that positively affect their community. As an example, Parkside International Residential College has reached out to Global Health to join forces in the education of our freshman population; we intend to offer space for their events and programs, and to give them a footprint on the University Park Campus. They in turn will offer Global Health concerns to freshmen as an application to the array of majors and studies they will pursue over their time here.

Having picked up on best practices from our experts this year, I am currently trying to co-create a course that brings together the talents and interests of Annenberg School of Journalism director Geneva Overholser and Jody David Armour of the Law School. The course in question would be open to MFA playwrights, journalists and law students, and would deal with questions of justice.

**CONCLUSION**:

The city of Los Angeles remains the main, and largely untapped, laboratory. To quote Stephan, “One natural opportunity lies in further integrating the themes of urban life and health care into our curriculum.” We hope that each discipline should be encouraged and incentivized to develop their own capstone experiences, and also to build collaborations with laboratories, libraries, companies, and museums within Los Angeles.

Besides fertilizing these initiatives, we hope the Provost’s Office can also actively incentivize cross-campus teaching through the creation of a new university capstone committee, hand-picked from across the campuses, consisting of faculty and administrators who have themselves achieved interconnections between disciplines. Such a campaign would allow the Provost to direct a new generation of forward-thinking faculty across our university campuses towards research goals identified by USC’s strategic plan.

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**APPENDIX**:

The following testimonies come from CTAP committee members and other interested parties.

From **Brent Blair**, Head of the MA in Applied Theater Arts, SOT:   
  
Glad you are on the committee looking at best practices for interdisciplinary work.  Applied Theatre Arts programs and courses at USC have sought to work across disciplines for many years, and continue to seek relationships and partnerships with other programs at USC.  
  
Just yesterday I had a meeting with Hanna Garry, the newly appointed Director of the International Human Rights Clinic at the Gould School of Law.  We spoke about investigating more work between our MA program and the Gould School of Law around Liberation Arts and Community Engagement.  This is not for publication, obviously, as we're just in the initial conversation phase, but it sets the tone for the type of work we are hoping to do in our program.  
  
Our collaboration in the past with Heather Wipfli and the Global Institute for Health has a more concrete history.  I have consulted with them in the application of ATA in the realm of global health education, for example.  I conducted a workshop and talk for their High School summer program at USC, and consulted with Heather on her presentation to Ugandan Health practitioners in Uganda on the perils of smoking.  Here is a thank you e-mail from her describing that collaboration:  
  
\*\*\*\*\*\*\*E-MAIL FROM HEATHER\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  
  
Hi Brent,  
  
I wanted to send a note to thank you soo much for sending along the notes on games to play during my recent tobacco training in Uganda. The 'hot seat' game was honestly the highlight of the entire week long training. We had a terrific 'industry CEO' that made it work amazingly well. I also woke them up with Romeo and Juliet. I so appreciate how well interactive exercises improve the quality of instruction.  
  
Hope we have a chance to see each other again soon! There was some interest in having me do a training in Rwanda - so maybe at some point our paths will cross in the field.  
  
Best wishes,  
  
Heather  
  
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On a more formal note, we have been working with Alexander Capron of the Keck School of Medicine to help him devise some Theatre of the Oppressed scenes for his 2nd year Medical Students.  In short, we present a play that he developed with a TO practitioner from Omaha some years ago (a colleague of mine) for their medical students to problematize the ethics of denying health care for poor patients. The challenge was for the 2nd year medical students to replace the protagonist and discover what they might do under similar circumstances.  
  
We consistently have Social Work students and Cinematic Arts students enrolled in our grad classes.  We look forward to a collaborative degree (dual degree) in the future between ourselves and other units, such as the School of Social Work - but this is farther down the pike.  
  
The MA / ATA program depends on collaboration and interdisciplinarity.  We look forward to many more collaborations in the future.  
  
Hope this is helpful!

From **Stephan Haas**, committee member:

Thoughts on cross pollination between the campuses, best practices, and capstone experiences

Stephan Haas (USC Physics & Astronomy)

How to turn a challenge into an opportunity? Collaboration between USC’s several campuses is typically viewed as a challenge on several levels. In particular, the physical distance between the UPC and HPC is frequently perceived as a deterrent for day-to-day interactions between researchers, and as a nuisance for students who are trying to take classes and participate in research and internships at both locations. In addition, a difference in culture has developed between all of USC’s campuses, Wrigley being a laid back research haven, UPC a bubbly modern community, and HPC a more professional environment with a commuter feel. From the perspective of offering our student community a wide spectrum of educational experiences and environments, this is not necessarily a bad thing. So, how can we build on this diversity as an element of strength? One natural opportunity lies in further integrating the themes of urban life and health care into our curriculum. The communities, structures and cultures in downtown Los Angeles present a unique opportunity for our students to create meaningful academic experiences in the field, be it in the arts, sociology, legal or health care. Capstone experiences should make use of these resources, which set USC apart from other first tear research universities. In order to have these experiences grow organically, rather than being rigidly dictated from top to down, the administration should focus on incentives and reducing barriers. Incentives, such as curriculum development grants and initiatives centered around further integrating USC in its urban environment would be a preferred tool. Furthermore, removal of barriers, such as the current lack of accessibility of Keck facilities to train our undergraduates and improved shuttle and video conferencing facilities would be very effective. In addition, each discipline should be encouraged and incentivized to develop their own capstone experiences around these themes, and also to suggest further themes that present unique opportunities, such as collaborations with laboratories (e.g. JPL), libraries (e.g. Huntington), companies (e.g. Boing) and museums (e.g. Getty) in the area. Besides acting as a fertilizer for these initiatives, the central administration can also create and incentivize inter-disciplinary capstone experiences, built around transformative faculty members who are bringing special expertise in a variety of areas identified by USC’s strategic plan.

From **Sarah Ingersoll**, committee member:

The bad news: There are numerous financial and administrative barriers to straightforward cross-disciplinary teaching. Exhibit A: A dean, when approached about a cross-departmental course with an ambiguous revenue model responded: “Our business model is fairly simple:  We provide instruction in exchange for tuition.” Exhibit B: An Associate Institute Director (Global Health) described the challenge involved in channeling revenue to support an enterprise-wide effort. Exhibit C: A long-term observer on the committee made the observation “Trans-disciplinary institutes are forced to federalize due to a lack of a central administrative infrastructure,” e.g., IML.

The good news: There are numerous ideas about achieving cross-pollination in novel ways. The committee had the benefit of exchanges with some of USC’s visionary leaders. A recurring theme was the notion of doing something new, to bypass the traditional infrastructure (see above). One obvious best practice is to secure external funding, e.g., the Shoah Foundation.

Alternatives:

A. Capstone Experience: this would involve senior undergraduates in a final experience that could be structured to require and/or involve cross-school activity. Presumably would involve undergraduates only.

B. Los Angeles/the urban milieu: this would involve collaborative work with community agencies (a diversity of agencies) and would focus on the urban experience broadly defined.

C. A specific course taught by a range of experts, e.g., History of Medicine: this was discussed in more specific detail with Prof Bill Deverell. There was consensus that this is truly interdisciplinary and could be taught, without much additional investment, by a panel of faculty, each of whom has an ongoing interest and established expertise. Underlying assumption here is that each expert would not require reimbursement for his/her individual contribution.