

Report of the Ad-Hoc Committee on Interdisciplinary Teaching and Research 2020-21

Charge: To get a better understanding of ITR (Interdisciplinary Teaching and Research) practices at PSU and elsewhere and to develop practical recommendations to support them at PSU, for consideration by Faculty Senate.

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Activities: During the academic year 2020-21 the Ad-Hoc ITR continued to investigate past, present, and aspirational ITR practices at PSU. It conducted a survey among the PSU faculty as well as additional conversations with administrators with the aim of gathering a deeper sense of which are our current ITR practices and obstacles, as well as to suggest specific paths of action (beyond previous recommendations) for moving forward in creating a robust interdisciplinary education at PSU. The present report includes:

- A. Summary of findings (based on survey and conversations)
- B. Faculty Survey Comments (Spring 2021)
- C. Recommendations: Paths of Action

A. Summary of Findings

PSU's faculty and students engage regularly in interdisciplinary practices. As evidenced by the faculty survey, PSU presents a rich and diverse landscape regarding faculty ITR interest and activity with students, among themselves and with other faculty at other universities and institutions in our local and global environments. At the institutional level, in addition to a solid interdisciplinary education through University Studies (UNST) and University Honors College (HON), and schools such as School of Gender, Race, and Nations (SGRN), PSU offers interdisciplinary undergraduate programs in Arts and Letters, Liberal Studies, Science, and Social Science, housed in College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS). These programs attract students and had the following total enrollments during the period 2016-20: 2016=321, 2017=352, 2018=342, 2019=340, and 2020=305. However, they seem to lack visibility for both students and faculty. There are also several multi-school initiatives that seek to contribute to our ITR efforts, such as the new Emergency Management and Community Resilience Certificate, the Urban Design Collaborative, The Digital City Testbed Center, the Health Care Administration Certificate, as well as other initiatives being proposed or in the making, on areas such as cybersecurity, cognitive cultural studies, business intelligence and analytics, or pop culture (to name a few). These initiatives hold much promise for strengthening and widening the interdisciplinary options available to our students. A close monitoring of enrollment and outcomes will be needed over the next few years to help us assess their impact and continue to build a clear interdisciplinary path.

Despite the enthusiastic support and efforts of faculty and administration regarding interdisciplinary initiatives, several obstacles impede an optimal development of ITR at PSU. Among the barriers that have been identified are:

- 1) our current budget model and Student Credit Hours (SCH) distribution practice, which discourages collaboration among faculty and course cross-listing
- 2) a lack of financial investment and insufficient support for the faculty involved in interdisciplinary initiatives, as well as a lack of recognition of interdisciplinary efforts in Promotion & Tenure (P&T) guidelines and reviews
- 3) the absence of a central anchor or home for interdisciplinary studies at PSU
- 4) lack of a regular systematic review of our interdisciplinary programs
- 5) lack of sufficient coordination/communication among unites and schools, lack of sufficient visibility/advertising of interdisciplinary programs and initiatives
- 6) need to create clear interdisciplinary paths in connection to effective advising
- 7) lack of central faculty-coordinated group or committee to coordinate ITR efforts by bridging and working with the different groups and constituents involved in interdisciplinary education at PSU

A more detailed view of these barriers emerges from the responses to the faculty survey that accompany the present report (see survey results accompanying this report).

Our current budget model and credit hour distribution model seem particularly detrimental for interdisciplinary growth at PSU. This problem was identified in a previous survey on interdisciplinary practices and barriers conducted by the Academic Quality Committee (AQC) in 2017. It was further denounced by the Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Summer Research Committee on Academic Program Examination / Reorganization in their 2020 report, where we read:

Striving to maximize the Student Credit Hours (SCH) may lead departments and units inadvertently to engage in perverse and inefficient academic behavior. For example, departments may convert major courses into UNST cluster courses to generate SCH and maximize enrollments, which results in a bloated cluster curriculum. Departments are often reluctant to cross-list classes or include courses from other departments in degree programs so they can maximize their own SCH production. Turf-wars over curricular offerings play out in UCC [Undergraduate Curriculum Committee] and GC [Graduate Council]. **These attitudes enhance the siloing of departments, lead to duplication of expertise between departments, and decrease opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and cooperation, particularly between Schools and Colleges.** If the pursuit of SCH were not such a big priority, departments might find ways to reduce the number of courses required for degrees, thus streamlining the curriculum for students. This committee recommends that the Faculty Senate work with OAA [Office of Academic Affairs] to re-envision how we weigh efficiency vs. SCH and enrollment figures. (15)

Themes, ideas, and recommendations that arouse from this year's conversations with administrators (mainly deans and program directors) include (not listed in order of importance):

- 1) desirability of co-teaching and need to support it
- 2) hiring more faculty who work across disciplinary lines

- 3) reviewing P&T guidelines to incorporate ITR as an indication of success and training P&T reviewers
- 4) ITR awareness in shaping new budget model
- 5) encouraging chairs and deans to reach out to their faculty about ways to collaborate with faculty in other units and colleges
- 6) accreditation requirements as an obstacle
- 7) crucial role of advising our students (understanding pathways and interdisciplinary programs and connections to local and global problems and their future careers)
- 8) importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training
- 9) community engagement and impact
- 10) advertising and visibility of interdisciplinary programs, initiatives, and faculty engaged in ITR practices
- 11) need to change SCH model (looking for creative alternatives that help us foster ITR practices instead of limiting them)
- 12) reviewing clusters
- 13) understanding co-teaching and crediting it adequately
- 14) incorporating the humanities to the sciences (e.g., from STEM to STEAM*) to help students acquire needed skills for success and innovation, such as critical and creative thinking, and effective communication
- 15) need to reestablish PSU's interdisciplinary-focused Public Humanities Center
- 16) creation of an interdisciplinary faculty with information on their interdisciplinary fields and practices visible to other faculty and students
- 17) expand PDXScholar as a visibility platform for ITR
- 18) communication channels for faculty to connect and collaborate
- 19) increase investment in ITR
- 20) create a centralized structure to manage ITR (e.g., interdisciplinary college) or house in SGRN
- 21) encourage faculty creation of interdisciplinary courses and programs
- 22) review curriculum with a ITR and DEI lens
- 23) center ITR on student experience
- 24) offer INTD as a marker for courses
- 25) support ITR through initiatives such as ReImagine PSU
- 26) fix inequities and colonial attitudes in funding distribution (budget model)
- 27) have indicators of success centered on student experience rather than SCH
- 28) reward ITR faculty efforts
- 29) provide faculty with course releases to allow them the time to engage in ITR initiatives
- 30) provide our students ITR education and opportunities to match our increasingly interconnected world
- 31) be aware of changing student demographics and interests

B. Faculty Survey on ITR at PSU

The Faculty Survey was administered in Spring 2021 with the assistance of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP). Questions were designed to obtain both quantitative

* From “Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics” to “Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics.”

and qualitative data and the survey contained a question specifically directed to department chairs. 195 responses were collected. A brief summary of the responses/comments in each of the survey's questions appears below (the results of the survey, including graphics as well as full text responses, are available as part of the ITR Ad-Hoc Committee records).[†]

1. PRESENT AND FUTURE PRACTICES

Existing Practices

In discussing their past and present interdisciplinary practices, faculty point to their own research as being of interdisciplinary nature. They also engage in the development and teaching of interdisciplinary courses and collaborate with other universities in the US and with outside agencies. Team teaching with faculty in other colleges/schools/units receives the lowest number of responses along with team research with students in other colleges/schools/units. In their text responses to this question faculty often signal UNST as a locus of interdisciplinary activity.

Perceived Practices

When asked how and where they are seeing interdisciplinary practices and interdisciplinary collaboration at PSU, faculty point mainly to initiatives among faculty and across disciplines within colleges, with the lower number of responses pointing to initiatives and collaboration across the humanities and science divide. Text answers mark UNST as the unit with higher interdisciplinary visibility. Faculty's responses also evidence obstacles such as our current SCH distribution system and point to a lack of visibility of interdisciplinary practices that occur outside of one's particular unit.

Moreover, faculty explain generously, in great detail, the nature of their interdisciplinary practices as well as the fields that integrate their interdisciplinary work (full answers available in survey results). Their responses attest to the width and diversity of interdisciplinary practices at PSU and the high interest of our faculty in interdisciplinary teaching and research, which evidences the existence of a vibrant interdisciplinary culture that can be fully established and flourish if the existing obstacles are addressed and removed.

Aspirations

When asked which interdisciplinary teaching and/or research activities they would be interested in undertaking in the future, faculty show a similar high interest in almost all the practices identified in the survey with a slight preference for team teaching with PSU faculty. The lowest number of responses is given to Work at PSU centers and university-wide initiatives, possibly denoting (in the context of the whole survey responses) an understanding of interdisciplinary practices as needing to happen organically among the faculty and then be supported by the institution rather than emanating in a top-down fashion from institutional or administrative initiatives.

2. EXISTING BARRIERS

Faculty continue to point to the current budget model and institutional structure as a barrier. This model encourages departmental competition for SCH and discourages course cross-listing and team-teaching. Faculty point to team-teaching not being fully understood and promotion and

[†] PSU Faculty may contact the Secretary to the Faculty to obtain this documentation.

tenure practices, which tend to undervalue interdisciplinary teaching and research. These responses are echoed by the text answers/comments, evidencing once more the detrimental effect of our current budget practices around SCH.

3. ASPIRATIONAL PRACTICES AND CHANGE

NB: Some faculty seem to have experienced a technical problem with the ranking function of this question in the survey, thereby responses might not be reliable. We are not including comments on this section, but we focus instead on the related ideas expressed by the faculty in the next survey question (Comments/Additional Suggestions).

4. COMMENTS/ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Faculty voice concerns and barriers to the development of ITR at PSU that have to do mainly with the following areas:

- lack of support for faculty engaged in ITR: workload (lack of equity in teaching loads across the university) and lack of time (release time needed), specific barriers for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty (NTTF) and adjunct faculty, lack of support for grant writing and assistance with external funding opportunities, lack of time and financial support for research and preparation in general
- lack of investment/ resources/equity: interdisciplinary focused/General Studies (SGRN, UNST, HON) programs not being sufficiently funded, lack of equity in distribution of resources, lack of DEI lens and Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) representation, Sponsored Projects Administration (SPA) underfunded, lack of support of university wide research centers
- institutional structures/structures and attitudes: budget model and current SCH practice, team teaching not considered full credit, P&T not valuing ITR initiatives sufficiently, siloing of resources and siloed thinking, lack of understanding of ITR value for our students and value of interdisciplinary approaches to solving our communities' problems, lack of visibility, lack of sufficient cooperation among departments in setting curricular requirements, lack of metrics that recognize interdisciplinary courses and collaboration, lack of reward of ITR practices

5. RELEVANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING AND RESEARCH (OPTIONAL)

Faculty make a strong case for ITR practices in this section, highlighting themes such as integration, creativity, diversity, innovation, effective problem-solving, adaptation to today's world, critical thinking and other higher-order thinking skills and development, responsibility, collaboration, co-learning, perspective-taking, empathy, etc. (see full text answers in survey results).

6. QUESTION FOR DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

In this section, responses range from descriptions of departmental initiatives to recommendations. For instance, in describing the ITR practices and obstacles existing in their department, one respondent states "Our department is thoroughly interdisciplinary ... Strengths: creativity, students benefit from many different lenses needed to make sense of real-world

problems and integrate theoretical frameworks. Weaknesses: power struggles, lack of understanding, and recognition of different disciplinary approaches; consistency for students when faculty from different disciplines rotate through teaching same course.” Along with the identified strengths, the following challenges/weaknesses (which can lead to recommendation and change) are also stressed by chairs: barriers for co-teaching and collaborating with colleagues in different disciplines and colleges due to institutional discouraging structures, lack of value placed in ITR, lack of support for underrepresented students in some disciplines, lack of language and international perspectives, cross-listing barriers, few formalized ITR initiatives, and (once more) our SCH practices.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

Previous Senate recommendations on ITR practices (background):

1. 2017 AQC SURVEY

The Academic Quality Committee conducted in 2017 a survey whose main takeaways were:

- Most indicate across disciplines and within/between colleges represents interdisciplinary work
- What practices do faculty support?
 - university-wide project with faculty development funding
 - create a center with funding to support interdisciplinary research
- What are the barriers to interdisciplinary research?
 - lack of funding sources
 - not valued formally for promotion
- What are the barriers to interdisciplinary teaching?
 - funding model
 - competing interests
 - faculty workload

4 years later, in the faculty survey conducted by the ITR committee (Spring 2021) those stressed recommendations and barriers resurfaced, giving us an indication that we have failed to address some of the main obstacles that we face for ITR practices, such as our budget model.

2. SUMMER 2020 REPORT FROM THE FACULTY SENATE AD HOC SUMMER RESEARCH COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC PROGRAM EXAMINATION / REORGANIZATION

This report included the following ideas and recommendations regarding ITR practices at PSU:

“Form a committee to support existing interdisciplinary degrees and investigate the creation of new ones at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Interdisciplinary degrees can attract new students, increase faculty collaboration, and create efficiencies.” (3)

“This committee also recommends steps to create interdisciplinary degrees at the graduate and undergraduate level and enhance faculty supervision of existing interdisciplinary degrees.” (6)

“Current disincentives for collaboration across colleges, schools, departments, and units hampers faculty ability to create truly interdisciplinary academic programs. Fostering interdisciplinary studies across 16 majors could strengthen our offerings as we look toward the future. Identifying themes best tackled by interdisciplinary approaches, where we already enjoy faculty expertise, could be very useful in improving curricular efficiency; migration, global health, climate change, and food systems come to mind. The themes could be built into certificates, or perhaps even degrees. By reallocating resources toward high quality interdisciplinary programs, PSU could provide programs unique in our region and attract students who would otherwise not come. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) offers three Interdisciplinary Studies BA/BS degrees (Arts and Letters, Science, and Social Science) that attract many students. Data could be gathered regarding what attracts students to these degrees and how, in practice, students receive mentoring and guidance in choosing courses for their majors. Similarly, insights could be gathered from graduate-level interdisciplinary programs (such as those offered in the School of Gender, Race, and Nation and in the School of the Environment, as well as the new CUPA [College of Urban and Public Affairs] program in Emergency Management and Community Resilience). (For examples of how other institutions administer their interdisciplinary degrees at the graduate level, see section VI, above).” (16)

Finally, the report recommended “that the Faculty Senate examine the possibility of expanding our interdisciplinary degrees at the undergraduate and graduate levels:

- a. The work could be housed in several locations:
 - i. Option 1: The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC) and Graduate Council (GC) examine the interdisciplinary degrees as part of their usual functioning, consulting with each other, as well as with OAA, advising, and ARC [Academic Requirements Committee].
 - ii. Option 2: Faculty Senate creates an Ad Hoc committee, with members appointed by the Committee on Committees and with consultants drawn from the Advising and OAA, as well as ex officio members from UCC, GC, and ARC.
- b. We recommend that the Senate charge the committee with
 - i. Evaluating existing interdisciplinary certificates and degrees.
 - ii. Identifying themes best tackled by interdisciplinary approaches, where PSU already enjoy faculty expertise. The themes could be built into certificates, or perhaps even degrees.
 - iii. Proposing a structure for implementing and supervising new and existing degrees of this sort.” (17)

3. 2019 ITR AD-HOC COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

In its first year of work to understand PSU ITR practices and issue recommendations, the committee suggested the paths for future work outlined below:

- In order to foster ITR, along with proposing structural changes we must create and maintain a constant narrative that stresses its importance.
- We need to foster multimodal writing that exposes our students to how different disciplines articulate knowledge.
- We need to expand interdisciplinary undergraduate research as well as incorporate a stronger interdisciplinary focus in graduate school.
- At PSU, cluster hires might be a step in the right direction, but they have a limited scope. The same applies to Centers of Excellence, which should incorporate a wider representation of faculty from different fields.
- We need smart investment in faculty development and reconsider our reward system at the University.
- Resources available to faculty to help them engage in ITR need to include funding for: course development, coordinating and meeting time with other faculty from other areas, course release.
- Teaching loads and assignments need to be reconsidered to allow for co-teaching models.
- We need continuity: often programs and ideas come and go with the administrators.
- Phasing out of TT positions of retiring faculty has to go through the Senate.
- Foster creation of smaller, thematically joined programs/departments as an organizational unit, with some budget autonomy.
- Encourage interdisciplinary online classes and certificates.
- We need a success model of “getting better in place” rather than through “growing” which is unsustainable for PSU.
- SCH distribution is an obstacle. SCH is currently assigned by course prefix. Conversations changing the model to one where SCH follows faculty would initially need to involve the Budget Office and OIRP. The question remains of how this would be done for faculty who have split appointments and are funded by more than one area.

4. CURRENT ITR AD-HOC COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS: PATHS OF ACTION

During 2020-21, the committee continued to work to investigate PSU ITR practices, barriers, and possibilities in more depth, with a focus on paths of action that we can take. Based on all the data available (2021 survey and conversations, previous 2017 survey and previous reports) the committee offers the following paths of action and urges our administration and relevant constituents to work with Faculty Senate in following these paths and implementing these specific recommendations:

- 1) **New Budget Model:** In the on-going process of building our new model, guarantee that ITR is a solid pillar, and that PSU creates opportunities for investment in ITR initiatives and financial support to allow for time and other needed resources.

- 2) **DEI Lens:** Make sure opportunities and resources for ITR are distributed equitably across the university, with attention to the needs of BIPOC/underrepresented/undersupported individuals.
- 3) **Current SCH distribution practices:** Review and replace with a model that fosters collaboration rather than competition (e.g., by SCH credited to instructor instead of unit), to remove obstacles for effective ITR.
- 4) **Promotion and Tenure:** Work on adjusting P&T guidelines and their implementation to fully recognize, support, and encourage ITR practices.
- 5) **Hiring:** Promote the hiring of faculty engaged and interested in ITR.
- 6) **Advising:** Ensure that students understand and have access to interdisciplinary paths.
- 7) **Visibility:** Widely and effectively advertise interdisciplinary programs and courses and their connections to career paths. Ensure that students have access to information on faculty engaged in ITR practices.
- 8) **Institutional Core:** Establish a central home for Interdisciplinary Studies at PSU and ensure coordination with the different colleges/schools and departments/units.

Finally, we recommend that Faculty Senate creates a structure for continued and sustained work on ITR, mainly:

- 1) continuing to explore and address the ITR themes and issues identified in this report
- 2) evaluating existing as well as creating new interdisciplinary courses, programs, and initiatives
- 3) collaborating with the administration in implementing the recommendations outlined above

Options may include (not mutually exclusive):

- 1) Forming a constitutional ITR committee through the Committee on Committees (CoC). This committee could feature faculty, staff, administration, student, and board representatives, from the relevant committees and groups: UCC, GC, Budget Committee (BC), ARC, AQC, Global Diversity and Inclusion (GDI), OAA, Associated Students of Portland State University (ASPSU), Board of Trustees (BoT), etc.
- 2) Disaggregating and delegating ITR work to the corresponding committees and groups listed above and designating a person to act as coordinator/liaison among these working groups and between these groups and the Faculty Senate Steering Committee