Approaches to Managing and Sustaining Interdisciplinary Programs at Comprehensive Learning Centered Universities

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Introduction

There is quite a large set of literature dealing with various aspects of interdisciplinarity in the academy. It takes a variety of forms including extolling the virtues of interdisciplinarity (Lattuca 2001; Klein, 2005), identifying the motivations for launching and sustaining such programs at universities and secondary schools (Thomas and Gilespie, 2007), assessing team taught interdisciplinary courses (McKinley, 1996), designing individual courses (Garkovich, 1982), appraising interdisciplinary learning (Field, Lee and Field, 1994; Stowe, 2002), and arguing for the research advantages interdisciplinarity offers for dealing with real world research problems (De Costa, 1986; Smith and Pilling, 2007; Spies, 2001; Kelly, 2006) and obtaining prestigious external grants.

Much more limited in scope is the literature that explores the managerial and organizational correlates of successful interdisciplinary work. Furthermore, the literature that addresses organizational and managerial issues, overwhelmingly concentrates on research and funding issues in major research universities. Very little is available on teaching-centered programs, particularly undergraduate programs, and on organizational leadership at teaching-centered institutions. Lattuca notes that even though the type of institution is very important in education theory, when assessing interdisciplinary programs, “institutional type seemed less important to informants than the perceived climate for interdisciplinarity” (Lattuca, 2001: 199). In this paper the authors explore the relevance of the issues and
solutions raised in the literature on research universities to a case of a large state supported comprehensive teaching institution in Georgia, Kennesaw State University.

Organization of Interdisciplinary Programs

The importance of implementing interdisciplinary research is emphasized in the strategic plans of many institutions (Feller, 2002: 109). The issues raised tend to involve national rankings and how interdisciplinary research can contribute both reputationally and financially to major research universities. The shortcoming seems to be that although many universities claim an interest in this approach, they are rarely organized in a way that managerially contributes to interdisciplinarity. Often, interdisciplinary programs do not become institutionalized and fail to outlive the grants which provided the initial raison d’être for their creation.

Universities are nearly universally organized along college and departmental lines that make working with new structural arrangements that traverse traditional boundaries difficult at best. Feller (2002) identifies a set of implementation issues affecting the development of interdisciplinary programs including budget control, indirect cost recovery and distribution, publication in interdisciplinary journals, compatibility with college and department strategic plans, promotion and tenure criteria, the value of joint authorship, reporting relationships, space allocations, honoring award agreements in terms of position assignments and restrictions on faculty autonomy. He goes on to argue that these issues taken individually and collectively are integral determinants of the organizational culture and result in
competing decision-making values in the academy. Support from the heights of central administration is regarded as essential to overcoming the institutional and organizational culture obstacles (also Lattucca, 2001).

The college and department as the basic building blocks of most universities reinforce the notion of hierarchy. The contextual factors, including the relative emphasis on teaching and research also impact on disciplinary commitments and potentially increase or decrease support for interdisciplinarity (Latucca, 2001: 209). However, what is needed to make interdisciplinary units and work survive are institutional flexibility and “adhocracy” rather than a more rigid hierarchical control (Feller, 2002: 113). What kind of organizational structures and culture lend themselves to this flexibility?

The Report of the Interdisciplinary Task Force of the AAU (2005) also emphasizes the growing importance of interdisciplinarity in the university. It highlights the importance of developing collaboration over competition between units. The authors concentrate on interdisciplinary research rather than teaching and identify the “center” as the key organizational unit employed for this purpose at research universities. Within this context the authors emphasize the importance of faculty engagement, administrative commitment, funding and resource support, joint appointments, control over positions, participation in tenure decisions, and clarity in governance, including internal and external reviews, establishing a steering committee and possible creation of “sunset” provisions. At the base of these considerations is how the “center” will “support or advance the mission of the
institution.” Also of concern is how it provides an opportunity for accomplishments not available through traditional schools and departments. This report is mirrored by the work of Paul Bell Jr. (2006) who notes that success is contingent on a dedicated faculty, energetic leadership, ongoing interest and successful negotiation of appointments and affiliations with the “center.”

Several studies examine specific cases of interdisciplinary strategies employed by leading research-intensive universities (Sa, 2006). Sa suggests that in the institutions he studied, “promoting interdisciplinarity is viewed as an organizational problem” (Sa, 2006: 1). Consistent with our view, he found that there is very limited empirical evidence presented in the literature that is based on actual cases and contexts. Sa (2006) proceeds to examine five case studies of top research intensive universities to see what insights can be garnered from their experience. He notes that the organizational response is traditionally to establish centers and institutes to complement the role of departments by conducting interdisciplinary research. However, since these units do not normally control tenure lines or award degrees they must depend on faculty goodwill for their existence and functioning.

Administrative and structural issues between units over questions like the distribution of indirecTs, credit for grants, and joint appointments cause these to be viewed by many, particularly department heads as part of a zero sum game. Sa’s conclusions are that “overcoming structural, cultural and political barriers to boundary-crossing work is a lengthy task given the nature of the university as an organization” (Sa, 2006: 4). Hence, several distinct approaches have been developed
by these universities. However, the approaches taken, he argues, are highly contingent and not necessarily replicable in a different environment.

What if anything can be learned from this limited sample of cases drawn from classical research universities in the management of interdisciplinary programs? Can these lessons be applied in the context of a comprehensive, learning-centered university? It is notable that, from our experience and observations, almost all the key issues which arise in research universities are very much the same in comprehensive institutions. Only the relative emphasis changes. The location of tenure lines, budget allocations, promotion and tenure guidelines, valuation of interdisciplinary publications, distribution of in-directs, space, reporting relationships, joint appointments, and faculty autonomy all have their place in the organizational lives of comprehensive universities as well. The apparent need for organizational flexibility and a “culture of adhocracy” rather than hierarchical control seems to these authors to be directly relevant to all universities interested in managing interdisciplinary work effectively.

**Alternative Models**

Based on the literature and organizational experiences at other institutions several different models for developing, maintaining and strengthening interdisciplinary programs present themselves. Most common, as noted in the literature review, is the setting up of a separate organizational structure, usually a center or institute, dedicated to interdisciplinary research and to a lesser extent teaching. These can be free standing or embedded in a school, or college or have
involvement across colleges in the same university. Although many such units exist in the sciences, they are also increasingly common in the humanities and social sciences. Faculty members may participate in these groups but their tenure and permanent appointments usually reside in the traditional departments. In addition, these units generally have small budgets and are expected to generate external funds to support many if not all of their programs. This is not consistent with maintaining an academic degree program, a function that is critical in many non “R1” universities.

A second approach is to place centers within traditional departments that oversee and coordinate their work, usually in terms of research and teaching. This was the case at Kennesaw State University up until 2006 when a new administration was installed. The downside is that this type of organization did not really encourage interdisciplinarity and may even have detracted from efforts to bring in a broad range of faculty and students. Furthermore, there is little incentive for department heads to allocate resources to these programs because they may be perceived as non-central to departmental goals and may be seen in terms of a zero sum game.

A less frequently used approach is to set up a department that encompasses a single or in rare cases a range of interdisciplinary programs. Area, regional or cultural studies departments, such as African or Latin American Studies are good examples of this approach. Sometimes more than one area studies program may be housed in a single area studies departmental structure. This provides the advantage
of institutionalizing the program(s) but has the disadvantage of perhaps discouraging interest in joint appointments with traditional departments and may hinder collaboration with faculty from other fields/colleges. An intermediate stage of development involves setting up a consortium of interdisciplinary programs to make more efficient use of scarce resources and to provide for common services and funding arrangements.

Finally, at predominantly undergraduate or masters institutions interdisciplinary, primarily undergraduate, programs are sometimes grouped together for efficiency. One model has these programs clustered together under an undergraduate college along with individualized majors and/or freshman experience courses. In other settings a quasi-departmental structure, reporting to an assistant dean or head of interdisciplinary programs, is created but faculty lines remain in their home departments (e.g. Appalachian State University). Speakers’ series or brown bags, films and discussions of common interests, seem to provide the raison d’être for the organization. Costs remain low regardless of the registration in related courses and for most faculty opportunity costs guide decision making.

At many institutions interdisciplinary programs are a combination of pre-existing curricula in specialized areas such as American Studies and a self-designed major. These are put together under the coordination of faculty from several departments but the interdisciplinary “major” remains under a coordinator without a formal department structure. A model more rarely seen has a core set of
integrative courses and a series of concentrations in interdisciplinary fields (Salem State University). This model requires a high degree of cooperation in order to achieve consensus around the core courses.

There are many additional nuanced organizational variants for interdisciplinary programs but the one thing they all have in common is their lack of centrality organizationally, to the academic mission of their respective colleges/universities. Budget cuts are most likely to occur in these areas, because they are often viewed as marginal. Position allocations favor traditional departments and retirements and resignations may have serious consequences for continuity in area studies programs (Vengroff, 2003).

The Case of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw State University is the third largest university in the State of Georgia with a student body of about 22,500. The institution has been dominated by a period of record growth, reaching levels of greater than five percent increases per year over the last five years. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS) is the largest of the six colleges in the university with 235 tenure-track faculty, approximately 175 adjuncts and over 5,000 students majoring in one of the fields offered by the departments and programs in the college.

The new dean of CHSS arrived at Kennesaw State along with a new President and a vision of KSU as a “national” university in June of 2006. At that time there were just a few “interdisciplinary” programs and due to a decision by a past V.P. for Academic Affairs all of these were embedded in traditional departments (primarily
African and African Diaspora Studies (AADS, major and minor), Asian Studies and American Studies (minor only) were under the Department of History and Philosophy. Gender and Women’s Studies (GWST) was a minor embedded in sociology, and environmental studies, peace studies, and Latin American studies were not yet established entities. It was clear from the low enrollments in these programs and the difficulty experienced by students of even finding an advisor that these programs were far from flourishing under the existing institutional arrangements. For example, in the three years prior to the change of administrations, not a single minor was awarded in Gender and Women’s studies (then called Gender Studies) and the prerequisites for it in sociology were extremely onerous. AADS had a set curriculum that required a course in psychology that had not been offered for several years. The advisor for the program was in the Department of History and Philosophy but was not an Africanist and had only been brought on board to stand in for the founder of the program who had moved to an administrative slot in another unit. American Studies (AMST) was a minor but still in its infancy. There was a desire by some faculty members to create an MA and eventually a major in AMST.

The Dean believed that in order to promote interdisciplinary research and academic programs as well as for the purpose of reinforcing diversity it was imperative to take these programs out of the departments in which they were embedded and to find an alternative organizational structure in which they could flourish and grow. This became a priority and an Associate Dean was assigned as the coordinator and advocate for the interdisciplinary programs.
Change in a University is always difficult. In a fairly typical institutional reaction the Sociology department resisted moving the minor in GWST out from under its control. The chair and some of his faculty argued very strongly for keeping the program in the department for reasons of “quality,” and because of its “natural affinity” with their discipline. The department was offered a new faculty line in return for their agreement to a smooth transition out of the Department for the GWST program. Leadership from within the faculty was critical. A young assistant professor in Philosophy and a full professor of English provided the guidance, enthusiasm and organizational skills necessary to begin mobilizing the many faculty members across the college and the university with interests in the field. Soon a large dynamic group was functioning. They chose a new name for the program; reorganized the minor along conceptual lines and away from traditional disciplines; created a first year experience learning community around the topic; organized speakers, internal and external as well as a conference; proposed new classes; created a student organization; developed a website; put together an affiliation plan and began discussing joint appointments.

The extrication of AADS and American Studies from the Department of History and Philosophy proceeded in a smooth fashion. An AADS advisory committee was established and the group started actively recruiting students, holding brown bags, and organizing a formal speakers’ series. American Studies, with a significant faculty overlap with Gender and Women’s Studies and AADS, followed a rapid trajectory of growth and interest. The dean’s office allocated some
limited operating, programming and travel funds for these programs. This seed money proved to be a solid investment.

Three critical elements were lacking: institutionalized leadership; physical space; and a “regular faculty.” It became apparent that these programs needed an institutional advocate if they were to overcome the day-to-day obstacles of operating in a department dominated environment. One of the College’s Associate Deans was charged with filling that advocacy role. In addition, governance plans were developed by each program. Based on these, a nominating process took place and course releases were provided to those selected to coordinate each program. A small budget, including travel, was provided for these programs collectively through the Associate Dean.

Fortuitously a new social sciences building had just been completed. One of the suites which included seven offices, a reception area and a conference room, was reallocated to the “interdisciplinary programs’ coordinators and a part-time secretary was assigned to assist them. Joint appointments had just been authorized by the university. Although tenure lines remained with the academic department, this created a new opportunity. Joint appointments were prioritized by the dean’s office initially to respond to program needs. Thus, there was an incentive for departments to seek out these positions (tenure is in the traditional department). The first such appointments were in Psychology and AADS, and English and AADS. Others followed and some faculty already at KSU requested joint appointments with one program or the other. Carefully worded agreements were worked out between
the core department and each program for the requirements for the joint appointments, including assessment criteria. Advertisements were collaboratively written and search committees representing both constituencies were established. As this process progressed new programs (Peace Studies, Latin American Studies, Environmental Studies and Asian Studies) were organized and became part of the process. In addition, a new coordinator of the gender and women’s studies program who holds a tenure track appointment in another college as well as her half-time assignment in CHSS became the first cross-college appointment of this type.

The presence of an advocate in the Dean's office sent a clear message to faculty involved in interdisciplinary programs as well as department chairs that the college administration was serious about supporting the development of these programs. In addition, the Associate Dean attended monthly meetings organized by the various interdisciplinary programs and provided advice and logistical support on matters ranging from curricular development, to website design and governance documents. He also served as a liaison between the programs and the Dean and department chairs.

In order to avoid a possible backlash from departments, faculty interested in affiliating with an interdisciplinary program had to obtain the approval of their department chair and their level of involvement was included in the annual “Faculty Performance Agreement.” In addition, incentives in the form of funding support for program development related activities went a long way to boost morale and expand the number of faculty actively involved in these programs.
A council of our interdisciplinary programs was established under the heading, Cultural and Regional Studies (CRS). The coordinators of each of the programs (African and African Diaspora Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Asian Studies, Peace Studies, Environmental Studies, Latin American Studies and American Studies) meet regularly, developed a shared governance plan and elected an overall coordinator. The Coordinator of Coordinators participates in the council of department chairs that regularly meets with the dean. One of the programs has had a masters degree approved and launched, two of them have majors and minors, another two have minors and are moving toward major status, and the remaining two have minors. This process has influenced the College culture positively and also been very helpful in promoting diversity. We have recruited several minority faculty members who have taken up joint appointments. We also support a speakers’ series, faculty discussion groups, student conferences, etc.

Department vs Programs

There has been a push from some of the member groups of the CRS program to transform their consortium into a formal academic department. We are now engaged in a debate regarding the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. On the positive side are the strengths derived from institutionalization of the programs, development of a formalized budgetary presence, and possible tenure track slots or shared tenure slots in the interdisciplinary programs. The downside include possible isolation of the programs from the departments they currently interact with, a reluctance to cooperate and collaborate by a department in what
might be perceived as a zero sum game, a decrease in the additional funds for travel and professional development that are distributed through these programs in addition to departmental resources, a decline in flexibility and adaptability to changing needs and new programs.

Faculty concerns were voiced regarding the credit and evaluation of joint publications and publications in interdisciplinary journals. Given the status of KSU as a comprehensive but learning-intensive university these issues are easier to address than would have been the case at a research institution. One of our institutional goals is to increase research output and insure that teaching is informed by solid research. Research demands for tenure and promotion are increasing steadily and interdisciplinary outlets provided more flexible opportunities for faculty and for joint-authored publications relying on more than one discipline. Our equal valuation of these with traditional disciplinary journals contributed to the culture change we were working on promoting institutionally.

Conclusions

Although many colleges and universities highlight the importance of interdisciplinarity in their programs of research and teaching their organizational structures do not appear to be keeping pace with these developments. We have examined the organizational literature on interdisciplinary programs and noted that there are common themes which emerge. Key among them are those that are potentially contentious such as resource allocations including faculty lines, operating funds, indirect cost distribution, tenure homes, joint appointments,
conflicting goals with traditional colleges and departments, course development, course registration and joint registration, and leadership and direction. The most common managerial approaches are to set up research centers and interdisciplinary teaching programs.

These issues seem to emerge regardless of institutional type. Those cases and problems identified in the literature on “research one” institutions arise in similar fashions in comprehensive and primarily undergraduate colleges as well. Given the hierarchical organization of most universities into departments and colleges, structures for interdisciplinary programs are often marginalized outside the dominant structures or are at least at a disadvantage relative to units with which they compete for scarce resources. In the case of research centers, their very existence is often viewed as time sensitive, with sunset provisions correlated with the life of grants. We have provided a case study of a large comprehensive university which reinforces the theses that there are strong similarities between institutions of different types.

We have also looked at a case study of the evolution of organizational arrangements at a comprehensive university, Kennesaw State (KSU) and tried to identify what we can learn from and contribute to the literature on interdisciplinary program implementation strategies. At KSU the organizational structure of these programs has evolved incrementally from a system of embedded interdisciplinary programs, to separate programs reporting to an associate Dean, to a consortium of programs with their own unit directors and an overall coordinator, and possibly
now as the individual programs have grown, to a more decentralized confederation of programs with separate budgets and some shared services.

The conundrum is what organizational form this evolving unit, now labeled Cultural and Regional Studies (CRS) should take. Three options along the centralized decentralized continuum seem feasible. At one pole is the change from its current consortial structure, to departmental status. Recall that one of the important current advantages of a non-traditional structure is collaboration between interdisciplinary programs and traditional departments and colleges and opportunities for joint appointments. However, a critical weakness is the limits of operating in a tentative non-traditional structure whose very existence is built on contingency factors and subject to challenge. Creating a new department (CRS) would serve to institutionalize these programs and insure their survival independent of incumbents of key administrative roles. The fundamental question is, can the programs maintain their current advantages of operating in a more flexible environment once they have taken this step. Will the individual units lose their flexibility in the context of the new department or can their effective decentralized consortial governance plan be maintained in a departmental format?

An intermediate strategy would be to maintain the current federated status as a collective of interdisciplinary programs with each program having a director, and the group selecting an overall coordinator. The groups share common secretarial and support services and a small collective budget. The overall coordinator attends the Chairs meetings in the college and acts in the capacity of a
quasi-chair. Faculty lines are joint appointments or affiliates and tenure is held in the traditional department rather than in a program.

A third approach is to further decentralize management in a loose confederal arrangement by providing each program with a separate operating budget which they individually manage and are held accountable for. This enables each program to grow and develop consistent with its programmatic needs and to exercise independence over management of its resources. Some core services, secretarial, staff, photocopying, and space are shared in a common suite to promote interchange. Under this model, the role of Coordinator becomes less formal. Program budgets are adjusted to the size, direction and development of each program, especially for the four larger programs (American Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies-AADS, Asian Studies and Gender and Women's Studies). Needs are clearly different for each. For example, American Studies has a growing Masters Program and a small undergraduate minor, while AADS has an undergraduate major, a minor and runs a large annual undergraduate research symposium, and Asian Studies is a minor but developing a major and planning a large Asian business conference.

The evidence is so far mixed. An organizational blue print for success remains somewhat elusive. Given the nature of the programs we are dealing with, retaining a flexible arrangement that allows for innovation, experimentation and differentiation, may be the most important lesson we can take from the literature and this case.
of Programs is called for. In essence, a learning process designed to maximize effectiveness seems to be called for.
Works Cited


