

College of Interdisciplinary Studies (or the Mitchell College): A Proposal

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Note: This draft proposal is informed by my many years of work trying to establish an interdisciplinary major at USM. It reflects my own personal perspective gained by working with various departments, programs and individuals at the University. I have come to believe that what is mostly needed at USM is an administrative structure that harnesses the creativity and talent of USM faculty who passionately care about education but often times feel inhibited by lack of support as well as institutional barriers. I hope you view it, as many are fond of saying recently, as a “conversation starter.”

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President Botman, in her “Opening Breakfast” speech, cited the challenges USM faces as it embarks on a radical administrative restructuring. At this time, she encouraged the assembled faculty *“to think boldly, think interdisciplinarily, to put aside personal or departmental interests and think about the success and future of USM holistically, about how to differentiate and distinguish ourselves in an increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environment.”* In the spirit of her remarks, what follows is a proposal that outlines a new College of Interdisciplinary Studies (CIS) at the University of Southern Maine (The Mitchell College).

The proposed College of Interdisciplinary Studies will foster and support interdisciplinary programs and initiatives in teaching and research as well as house university-wide support services that advance transformative educational experiences. It will supply coordination, promotion, administration and space for undergraduate and graduate programs that transcend individual departments, schools and colleges. It will also provide the administrative and support structures necessary to incubate new and exciting interdisciplinary programs that arise in response to the needs and demands of a changing world. Through the establishment of this college, USM will distinguish itself as a leader of interdisciplinary studies, a provider of engaged learning opportunities, and a potential community partner vis-à-vis its experiential learning programs.

The State of Interdisciplinary Studies at USM

Currently, many interdisciplinary programs at USM are nicknamed the “orphan programs,” primarily because many lack an academic/administrative home but also because of the unique challenges they face. Most are resource poor. They often rely on reluctant, disciplinary departments to release faculty to teach in their programs, usually at the departments’ expense. Personal rewards and incentives to engage in interdisciplinary work at USM are few and far between. In fact, faculty who contribute to interdisciplinary work do so at great professional risk. Few departments reward commitments outside disciplinary fields, viewing such work as a lack of commitment to their home departments. This has a negative impact on faculty who find few incentives to engage in interdisciplinary work; they recognize that hiring, tenure and promotion decisions are all disciplinarily based. For synergies to occur, interdisciplinary work needs resources and rewards.

Existing interdisciplinary programs vary widely in their administrative structures and resource base. A few programs have achieved department status and have dedicated faculty lines (ESP, Muskie, ANES). Some programs report to various Deans, others directly to the Provost (Women Studies, Honors). Some have Directors, some have Chairs or Coordinators and others exist primarily on the good will (or backs) of committed faculty. Few have budgets that rival department funding, while others have no resources upon which to draw funds and have a parasitic relationship with a disciplinary department. What is needed is a common logic by which interdisciplinary programs are established, administered, supported and funded.

Since current administrative structures and reward systems inhibit collaboration across departments, USM is limited in its ability to respond to the current educational environment characterized by competition and scarce resources. However, as the University recreates itself, an initial investment in a college administrative structure that lays the groundwork for innovative synergies through the creation of interdisciplinary

programs would reap rewards for years to come. Interdisciplinary programs use existing faculty and curricular resources to produce exciting and relevant programs, thus, they are cost effective. Interdisciplinary programs also demonstrate creativity because they think “outside the box.” Interdisciplinary work integrates knowledge, modes of thinking and experiences. This rigorous examination of real world problems and issues from multiple perspectives involves both depth and application of knowledge. This has the potential to expand USM’s interaction with the local community through service-learning projects. It also has the potential of attracting new majors and distinguishing academic programs at USM.

Unfortunately, a careful reading of the “White Paper” on restructuring at USM shows that past trends that inhibit interdisciplinary synergies continue. Although many discussions about interdisciplinarity occurred during initial strategic planning committee meetings, there is no administrative structure proposed in any of the “White Paper” scenarios that supports interdisciplinary work. This proposal hopes to overcome this shortcoming.

What USM needs is a collegial, collaborative environment, where diversity of thought and ideas, engagement with our local communities, and risk-taking and innovation will be rewarded. USM needs a place for faculty, staff, and students to propose new, innovative, and collaborative programs that bring together faculty, staff and students from across the university and the wider community. USM needs to encourage teaching and exploration that challenges disciplinary boundaries. USM needs a vision of an academic, administrative unit that does more than simply rearrange traditional disciplinary departments. USM needs something new.

The New College of Interdisciplinary Studies (The Mitchell College)

Existing degree granting interdisciplinary programs will find a home in the new College of Interdisciplinary Studies. Women and Gender Studies (WAGS), American

and New England Studies (ANES), International Studies (IS), Liberal Studies, Classics, Environmental Studies Program (ESP), Self-Designed majors (SDE), current LAC interdisciplinary programs, and Muskie's graduate programs (CPD and PPM) would all benefit from a centralized administrative structure that supports their unique needs and gives a voice and presence to interdisciplinary work at the University.

In addition, existing non-degree academic programs that have significant interdisciplinary components and share many of the challenges facing current degree granting interdisciplinary programs will join the above group. The Honors Program, Russell Scholars Program, and the new Gen Ed would be natural fits in the new college. In current restructuring scenarios, these programs are potentially housed within a University College detached from academic programs. This would be a mistake. The success of these programs relies on interactions with academic faculty and the perception of a "unique" academic program status that fulfills a special mission. Folding these programs into an innovation college structure makes logical sense.

The new interdisciplinary college will also house programs related to undergraduate research and programs that advance "engaged learning." Specifically, these programs include International Programs and study abroad, English as a Second Language (ESL), a Center for Teaching and Learning, an Office of Experiential Learning, and the Office of Civic Engagement. Once again, close collaboration with academic faculty and units within the College of Interdisciplinary Studies will advance USM's focus on "engaged learning." It will raise the status of these units and model how transformative educational experiences will define an education at USM.

Naming the new college the "Mitchell College" may allow USM to capitalize on one of Maine's favorite son's distinctive reputation in public service. The fact that the new college houses the International Studies major as well as International Programs will help sell this title. It may also mean success in future fund-raising efforts to support the innovative college programs that address real-world concerns and provide service to local

communities.

Administrative barriers currently in place, such as tuition differentials between graduate and undergraduate programs, need to be reassessed. The College of Interdisciplinary Studies should promote more fluidity between upper-level undergraduate classes and lower-level graduate courses. This can be achieved by creating 3-2 graduate programs. Graduate programs in the interdisciplinary college might also consider devising undergraduate programs or majors. Conversely, efforts at recruiting exceptional, local, high school students to finish their senior year at USM may be another initiative housed within this college. These students, known as “Mitchell Scholars,” will take USM courses to jump-start their college careers. Some may find that staying at USM to finish their undergraduate degrees will be cost-effective. They may also be attracted to a 3-2 graduate program in their area of study. These efforts will enhance undergraduate education and promote future graduate studies at USM.

Finally, a new College of Interdisciplinary Studies will provide an environment where faculty have support and space to “dream big.” This is the place where USM can renew and recreate itself over the years. It will be the hub of innovation that draws creative and positive faculty. It will be a way for USM to distinguish itself from its competitors. It will be a college whose mission is to be non-traditional.

The Administrative Structure of a New College of Interdisciplinary Studies

The special mission of the College of Interdisciplinary Studies can only be advanced by an administrative structure that is well constructed and well supported. Before entering the College, each program will undergo a review to assess how restructuring can benefit the program and attract a healthy pool of majors. Standardization of the administrative structure of each Interdisciplinary Program will be important to ensure consistency and quality and facilitate assessment in the future. Each program will have a faculty coordinator who will be assigned to the college. It will also

have an oversight committee (OC) made up of faculty who have appointments in disciplinary units and an affiliation with the college. Finally, the College of Interdisciplinary Studies will have a voice in high-level administrative meetings through its promotion by an Associate Provost.

What follows is an attempt to explain the standardization of the administrative structure of interdisciplinary programs that will be housed within the College of Interdisciplinary Studies.

Associate Provost: A tenured faculty member appointed by the Provost with experience in administration and interdisciplinary teaching. This person will have budgetary responsibility and will provide administrative support, promotion and coordination for interdisciplinary activities and initiatives, e.g. retreats, workshops, assessment, and faculty professional development. He/she will provide leadership for academic coordination, collaboration and communication between interdisciplinary programs. Chairs the Council of Interdisciplinary Programs; Reports to the Provost and sits on the Deans and University Councils; coordinates with Admissions, Advising & Academic Assessment (*Student Support*) (The role of the Dean/Associate Provost and USM Core Coordinator come from a working paper devised by Judy Tizon).

USM Core Coordinator: FT Professional staff. Develops and organizes teaching and learning events, researches and reports on best practices; maintains and conducts analysis on USM Core data base as required. Provides administrative support to the General Education Council, USM Core Curriculum Committee and Interdisciplinary Council. Organizes activities and events related to general education and the USM Core; oversees program assessment; has budgetary responsibility for the above activities. Provides administrative support as needed for Core scheduling, transfer evaluation, delivery and assessment in coordination with the Registrar, Transfer Affairs, Advising and Academic Assessment; coordinates with the chairs of the GEC and USM CCC. Reports to the Dean; sits on the General Education Council, USM Core Curriculum Committee and Interdisciplinary Council.

Program Coordinator (each program with have a coordinator)

Administrative: Secures outside funding for program development, develops internship opportunities, schedules programming on campus, chairs the Oversight Committee of their program, sits on tenure and promotion peer-review committees (as negotiated with each academic department), coordinates outside review of program, monitors and reports enrollments, manages program budget.

Personnel: Identifies faculty and personnel needs for Program, sits on tenure committees, evaluates part-time faculty.

Curricular: Administers scheduling of Program courses, coordinates scheduling of relevant courses in other participating departments, liaisons with contributing departments.

Student: Advises program students, recruit majors, responds to student complaints.

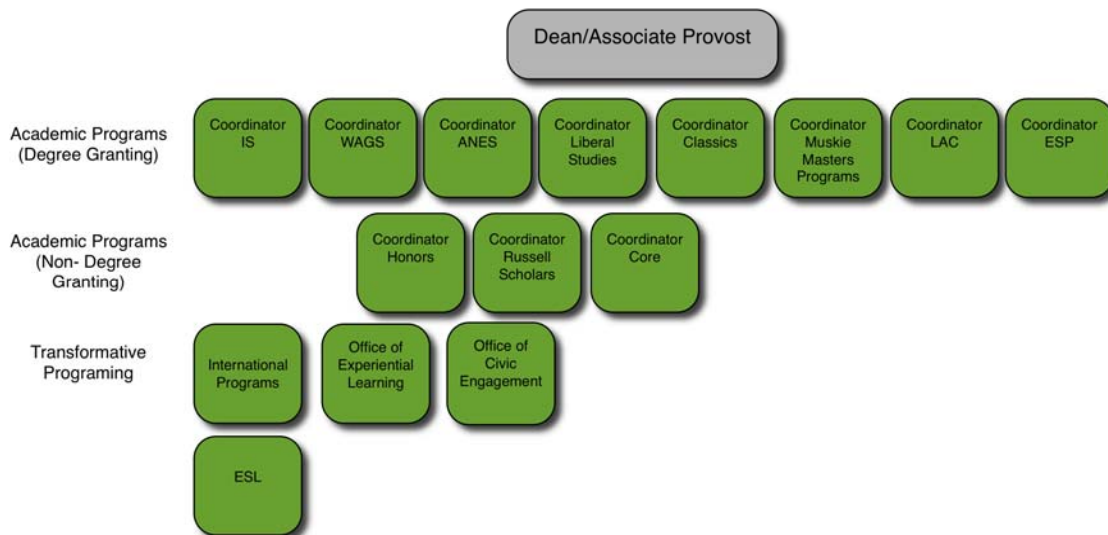
The Coordinator will be appointed to a three-year, renewable term. Prior to reappointment, there will be an evaluation submitted to the Associate Provost. The evaluation will be carried out in accordance with college policies and procedures.

Program Oversight Committee

The Oversight Committee (OC) will include elected faculty representatives from departments and the Coordinator (appointed by the Associate Provost). The OC is responsible for program oversight and will have final approval of the program curriculum. Work on the OC will be regarded as service.

OC members will have formalized affiliations with the Program. These affiliations will be negotiated with each contributing department and tailored to each faculty's needs. This will be specified in a letter from the Coordinator to the Chair of the contributing department. Representatives from the OC may be part of an individual's tenure and promotion peer-review committee if this has been negotiated with specific departments during the hiring phase or appropriately prior to the promotion committee meeting.

College of Interdisciplinary Studies



Interdisciplinary College Program Administration

