Cultivating the Collaborative Campus:
Team-Based Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching: A UNCW QEP Proposal

Overview

Pressing questions of the present center around complex phenomena. Climate change, equity and inclusion, global citizenship, coastal vulnerabilities, and cybersecurity represent just a few multifaceted issues that urgently require consciously interdisciplinary scholarly engagement. The need for interdisciplinarity and benefits that come from interdisciplinary research and teaching are well documented, as are the challenges that academic institutions face in cultivating both. Simply put, at universities we recognize the great value of deeply disciplinary *and* integrative interdisciplinary learning, but structurally we struggle most to provide the latter.

This QEP would promote interdisciplinarity at UNCW across four areas. First, through the development of interdisciplinary courses, programs, and well-integrated curricular collaborations. Second, through the promotion of interdisciplinary research, such as collaborative projects and grant applications and small team-based research groups with students. Third, through support for campus-wide programming that addresses questions that cross multiple disciplines. Fourth, by encouraging the development of academic and administrative structures to carry interdisciplinary scholarship into the future beyond this QEP.

The curricular focus of this QEP would leverage and expand existing successful programs like living/learning communities, team taught courses, and Honors courses, and it would build upon existing and emerging interdisciplinary programs at UNCW such as Africana Studies, Honors, and IDS. The goal is to make the interdisciplinary experience a norm for all students and part of the cultural fabric of UNCW.

The research focus is to build up research collaboratives/colliders that pull together scholars from different disciplines working on similar issues or areas of interest. The collider groups generate an interdisciplinary research culture and cultivate teams with the capacity to successfully pursue external funding. The goal is to create a value in interdisciplinary research at UNCW that aligns with existing RTP expectations in the established disciplines, while paving the way for measures of scholarly success in interdisciplinary research.

The community engagement element brings together students and faculty into multidisciplinary teams that can engage the community in identifying problems/questions and generate innovative solutions that will serve and inform the community. The QEP will encourage community partnerships to identify problems, student-faculty teams to work on these problems, and public fora to share progress and new ideas. The Port City is actively branding itself as an innovation hub. One piece of that broader picture is forging a university that is known as a community partner in innovation – innovation that is consciously interdisciplinary.

Context

UNCW has already acknowledged that current campus practices are not adequate to cultivate the interdisciplinarity we need to expand our research base, build curriculum, and generate community engagement. "Interdisciplinary teams" – specifically the need to "build teams for large interdisciplinary proposals" was cited by UNCW research faculty as the top priority for advancing our research capacity.[1] The creation of a provost's task force to investigate obstacles to interdisciplinarity also signals the urgency of the problem and the importance of cultivating interdisciplinarity to our developing strategic plan. How can the top priority for research growth *not* be addressed by an institution seeking to establish an identity as a research university? Further, as UNCW grows, centrifugal forces will invariably produce increased pressures towards a more sprawling, fragmented, and siloed campus. UNCW must

meet these challenges head on, with intentional policies and structures designed to bring faculty, staff, and students together to cultivate interdisciplinary collaborations.

This QEP will leave in its wake a permanent infrastructure and an audience to sustain interdisciplinarity. It will lead to deepened and expanded interdisciplinary academic programs for students, an interdisciplinary research culture with an anchor in RTP expectations, and a history of community engagement and partnerships built around interdisciplinary problem solving.

Project Description

Cultivating the Collaborative Campus incentivizes UNCW faculty, staff, students, and community partners to build collaborative inter-and trans-disciplinary teams across departmental and college/ school boundaries. Teams – at least eleven over the five-year life of the QEP – selected through a competitive process would organize around shared questions and develop plans for addressing them across three areas: teaching, research, and programming. UNCW would fund the work of three new teams annually (two in year one; none in year 5) for three years of annual funding at 20/15/10K (45K per team) or two years of annual funding at 20/20 (40K per team).[2]

Teams would need to directly address the UNCW mission and learning goals, particularly diversity and global learning. Longitudinal assessment of Diversity and Global Citizenship show that a higher percentage of lower-division course work scores at the target score level than higher division course work scores at the target score level, a trend that is consistent across every year of assessment for these two learning goals. Although student work meets the factual knowledge dimension (describing facts about a theme or issue tied to diversity or global citizenship), they fare poorly at higher-order thinking skills, including examining an issue from multiple perspectives, thinking about how culture and society influence perspectives, vetting and using evidence to support claims about diversity and/or global issues, managing ambiguous situations and cultural differences, and considering the ethical dimensions to actions. Our QEP seeks to address this student learning gap through interdisciplinary teaching and research that has students address issues from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Organizing questions would be proposed and developed by faculty and students, supported by QEP-sponsored collaborative workshops. Examples might include "How and why do societies change?" "What is racial justice and how do we get more of it?" "How can and should the world respond to climate change?" "How do trade and commerce affect human communities?" "How can societies promote human health and well-being?" and "What does a 21st century education need to look like?" All QEP-supported teams would be required to collaborate across multiple disciplines to enhance opportunities for the whole campus community in the areas of:

- Teaching, through the development and support of innovative high impact curricular experiences across disciplines, including but not limited to new living/learning communities, integrated capstone offerings, cross-disciplinary team-taught courses, study abroad experiences, and University Studies offerings. We would require each team to provide student learning opportunities aligned with either LDN or LGS, as well as integrative learning, connecting the interdisciplinary-enhanced academic experiences with Diversity and Global Learning outcomes.
- Research, including but not limited to collaborative projects and external grant applications, shared presentations of related research, and connected independent or small-team research by students where they can develop their teamwork skills.
- Programming that addresses shared questions, including but not limited to public discussions, student exchanges, visiting lectures, panel discussions, and performances and exhibits.

In addition to committing to accomplish the three goals above, teams would be broad-based with 5-10 faculty/staff members at the outset – ideally from multiple colleges/schools – expanding their engagement across campus over the course of the funding period and partnering with campus efforts to improve structures, policies, and procedures interdisciplinary activity.

Over the next five years, this QEP would offer opportunities for interdisciplinary connections and proactively develop an interdisciplinary culture at UNCW. It would enhance interdisciplinary skills among students, including disciplinary humility, integrative learning, diversity, as well as the ability to collaborate, communicate across majors and disciplines, and meet the needs of the wider community. UNCW has identified these as critical student success needs on campus. This QEP would:

1. Increase the number of interdisciplinary curricular opportunities, and opportunities for interdisciplinary work to "count" towards progress to degree.
2. Engage students and faculty in high-impact teaching practices (especially capstone courses, learning communities, research, and other collaborative learning opportunities) connected to questions raised by teams.
3. Encourage more research collaborations that build intellectual community and provide opportunities for student involvement. Because of their specialized and specific nature, much research on campus is intensely siloed and undervalued for what it can do to stimulate creative thinking across disciplines. We miss important opportunities to expand research opportunities because we struggle to build effective interdisciplinary synergies that many grants and external funding bodies want to see.
4. Model how the academy brings different ways of thinking and working together, and address gaps in our students' ability to meet learning goals that encourage diversity, global citizenship, and critical thinking.

Admittedly, there are challenges in this approach. We don't know what questions teams will organize around, and which institutional needs and learning outcomes they will address, so this QEP proposal is intentionally indeterminate. Faculty and students will determine what interdisciplinary connections they want to develop. We recognize that meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration is best generated from the grassroots around emerging needs.[3] Furthermore, we have never failed on this campus when we support faculty and staff creativity, innovation, and responsiveness to student needs. We would stress the need for teams to be inclusive, and through the incorporation of as many participants as possible, to look to have a significant community impact not only during but following their formal funding.

Adoption of this QEP would resource existing priorities by connecting team efforts to campus entities that seek to strengthen interdisciplinarity, including our Interdisciplinary Task Force, the Provost's office, and our new Academic Affairs offices dedicated to fostering student success, curricular development, community engagement and applied learning. Our budget also includes flexible funds to support offices and services that encourage interdisciplinarity: for example, Cahill grants to support interdisciplinary research and CTE curriculum development grants for interdisciplinary teaching. By reinforcing existing efforts, we can overcome current obstacles and leverage a campus culture that celebrates and resources collaboration.

As assessment of our last QEP demonstrated, QEP impacts can extend far beyond funded teams and initiatives. By supporting a culture change in teaching and learning, we will improve campus morale, build curriculum, and grow a new generation of campus leaders who value this critical, underdeveloped and woefully under-supported aspect of life at UNCW. We would expect the curricular offerings developed through the QEP to contribute to the evolution of general education and our cultivation of High Impact Practices across the curriculum.

Brief Literature Review

Scholarly literature on the value of integrated interdisciplinary curriculum, research, and high impact practices is extensive and covers a wide range of issues connected to interdisciplinarity in the academy. AAC&U has published several valuable resources, including the Integrative Learning VALUE Rubric that we propose using in our QEP.[4] The seminal article from *Liberal Education*, "Educating for a Complex World: Integrative Learning and Interdisciplinary Studies," provides working definitions of integrative learning and interdisciplinary studies.[5] Allen Repko's *Interdisciplinary Research Process and*

Theory presents the most comprehensive discussion of principles and practices of interdisciplinary engagement in Higher Education.[6] Repko and colleagues have published *Case Studies in Interdisciplinary Research*, and a textbook *Introduction to Interdisciplinary* used in several of UNCW's interdisciplinary programs, including International Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies.[7] The Association of Interdisciplinary Studies and Institute for Interdisciplinary Research hold conferences and publish issues about Interdisciplinary Studies. Distinguished sociologist George Steinmetz has argued that "generative" interdisciplinarity must be "motivated by intellectual problems" within and across fields, not "external compulsion,"[8] which aligns with our grassroots approach. A recent Council of Independent Colleges report called for renewed efforts on campuses to create innovative opportunities for interdisciplinary experiences for undergraduates.[9] Irma Becarra, president of Marymount College, in "The Need for Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education," emphasized the growing importance of interdisciplinarity and the need for innovative strategies to encourage it across the university.[10]

Beverley McGuire would serve as Director of the QEP, and she will either collaborate with colleagues or co-direct the QEP with someone outside the current QEP team. People external to the state of North Carolina who could potentially serve as QEP Lead Evaluator would be Allen Repko, Carol Geary Schneider, Mary Taylor Huber, Pat Hutchings, Ross Miller, Richard Gale, and Irma Becarra.

Budget

Item	Year 1 (Initiation)	Year 2 (Implement)	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5 (Complete)	5 YR Total
Interdisciplinary Teams ($40-40K each), ~11+ teams. Distribution: 3yr: 20/15/10; 2yr: 20/20	2@ 20K (40,000)	2@ 15K; 3@ 20K (90,0000)	2@ 10K; 3@ 15K; 3@ 20K (125,000)	3@ 10K; 3@ 15K; 3@ 20k; (135,000)	3@ 10K; 3@ 20K (90,000)	480,000
QEP Director(s): summer stipend and course release (2-2 if there is one QEP director; 1-1 if there aretwo)	35,000 16,0000	35,000 16,000	35,000 16,0000	35,000 16,0000	35,000 16,0000	175,000 80,000
Interdisciplinary research awards, curriculum development grants, etc. (supporting existing programs and initiatives)	100,000	100,000	100,000	100,000	100,000	500,000
Staff Support		80,000	80,000	80,000	80,000	320,000
Estimated Total for QEP	191,000	321,000	356,000	366,000	321,000	1,555,000

Figures are estimates and could be adjusted as planning develops. Team budgets are small but would allow teams to target priorities. The QEP assumes that existing funds at University, School and College level being used to support course development, research funding and releases, undergraduate research, etc. would also be available (in part) to support the efforts of teams and the university priority of enhancing interdisciplinarity. One-time funds would be appropriate for most of these expenses listed above. We do not anticipate any additional space needs or expenses.

Assessment Plan

As articulated in our project description, our three end goals are (1) to develop interdisciplinary courses, programs, and collaborations that have students integrate their learning across disciplines,

align with either Diversity or Global Learning outcomes, and incorporate High Impact Practices of Learning Communities, Capstone Courses, Research, or Collaborative Projects; (2) to promote interdisciplinary research, such as collaborative projects and grant applications, that involve students in team-based projects where they can develop their teamwork skills; (3) support programming that addresses questions that cross multiple disciplines. All teams, in collaboration with the QEP Director, would need to propose specific goals in each of these areas for each year of funding.

To assess the first goal – developing interdisciplinary courses and programs that require student learning opportunities that align with LDN or LGS, as well as integrative learning – we will not only collect program descriptions, curricular maps, course syllabi, etc. to assess the degree to which they facilitate interdisciplinary approaches and methods, but we will also collect and analyze students' signature work from such interdisciplinary courses to assess the degree to which students meet the LDN or LGS learning outcomes and integrate their learning across disciplines. We will use our general education assessment rubrics for LDN and LGS, and the AACU's Integrative Learning rubric, which evaluates the degree to which students make connections across disciplines and perspectives, transfer their skills, abilities, and methods from one situation to a new situation, integrate communication, and engage in reflection and self-assessment. We will share findings from scoring sessions with faculty so they can ensure that their courses are equipping students with the skills and training to meet LDN, LGS and integrative learning outcomes.

To assess the second goal – promoting interdisciplinary research, including the development of interdisciplinary projects and grant applications, as well as small team-based research groups with students – we will have groups submit mid- and end-of-year reports about their projects as well as team evaluations to chart research progress, identify any institutional obstacles to interdisciplinary research, and share ways that they successfully engaged in research and obtaining grant funding. When students are involved in such research, we will use the AACU's Teamwork rubric, as it evaluates the degree to which participants contribute, facilitate the contributions of other team members, and foster a constructive team climate. We will analyze such formative data to give feedback to interdisciplinary research teams, so that they can make any necessary adjustments to their programs.

To assess the final goal – supporting interdisciplinary programming that addresses questions that cross multiple disciplines – we will administer surveys to participants and attendees in order to assess the degree to which the programming adopts and encourages an interdisciplinary approach to shared problems and facilitates the transfer of skills, abilities, or methods from one situation to a new situation. We will analyze such surveys to identify any areas that might be in need of improvement, and how such interdisciplinary programming might be supported beyond the QEP.

At the end of each semester, after collecting and analyzing the artifacts mentioned above, we will discuss ways that teams might "course correct" so that they meet our three goals in all three phases of initiation, implementation, and completion. We also expect the current Interdisciplinary Task Force to identify targets and metrics for interdisciplinarity across campus, and we are very open to those metrics and goals being incorporated into the assessment processes for each of these three goals and the QEP as a whole.

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[1] UNCW Doctoral Transition Task Force Final Report (April 2020), p.16.
[2] Two teams would be selected in year 1, three in years 2-4, and none in year 5. Teams selected in year 4 would be funded for 2 years at 20k
[3] This is also supported by scholarship; see our literature review.
[4] Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). "Integrative Learning VALUE rubric". 2009. https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/integrative-learning
[5] Newell, William H, "Educating for a Complex World: Integrative Learning and Interdisciplinary Studies." *Liberal Education*, 96, no. 4 (2010) https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/educating-complex-world-integrative-learning-and-interdisciplinary

[6] Allen Repko and Rick Szostak, *Interdisciplinary Research Process and Theory*. (4th ed.) (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2020).

[7] Allen Repko, William H. Newell, and Rick Szostak, Case Studies in Interdisciplinary Research (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2011. Allen Repko, Rick Szostak, and Michelle Phillips Buchberger, *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2019).

[8] George Steinmentz, "How Interdisciplinarity Works: Field Theory and the Study of Interactions between History and Sociology" in *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, Social Science Research Council, October 4, 2016.

[9] Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education," CIC Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education Research Brief 2, May 2015.

[10] Irma Becerra, "The Need for Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education," *Forbes*, (July 22,2021), https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2021/07/22/the-need-for-interdisciplinarity-in-higher-education/?sh=36a4d27b1ad9