

Task Force on Interdisciplinary Initiatives: Recommendation for Implementation/ Final Report

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Premise: The TF on Interdisciplinary Initiatives is one of three Task Forces formed in late 2011 to respond to current trends in liberal arts education and at Middlebury in particular, and to address challenges and possibilities identified during the college's latest reaccreditation process in 2010/2011. A general call for participation in one of these Task Forces sent out by Provost Alison Byerly in fall 2011 produced a long list of names of people who were interested in working on these Task Forces, and each Task Force now consists of about a dozen members. The groups have been asked to produce a list of suggestions instead of a report of their discussions throughout the semester, and we consider everything in this list an expression of our serious commitment to making Middlebury an even better place for 21st century liberal arts education. Interdisciplinarity can happen in various forms and constellations, and we will consciously refrain from a limiting definition of this concept. However, one clear goal of interdisciplinary work (in the following: ID work) is encourage students and faculty to utilize methodologies and intellectual frameworks from one discipline to make new advances and insights in another or others. The productive cross-fertilization of two or more disciplines or distinct lines of inquiry happens on various levels at this college already, and we cherish the work that Middlebury's faculty is doing in this respect. However, we do believe that there is a strong interest in both the faculty and the student body to further develop and enhance new connections between things that are already happening and accommodate and respond to interdisciplinary interests that have increased on campus in recent years. This is what our suggestions wish to support and further inspire.

The situation right now: Interdisciplinarity on three levels

The college already offers models of successful interdisciplinary work on three levels:

- 1) Institutionalized/ formal interdisciplinary work: This includes programs and departments with ID approaches, such as INTL, WAGS, ENVS, IPE etc.; American Studies and departments with ID approaches (especially the languages); team-taught classes like INTL 0446, MUSC 0256; INTD 0206 (C. Faraone/ S. Abbott); some senior work (esp. joint majors); the now-defunct Sophomore Integrated Studies; the special case of the FYSE
- 2) Semi-formal/ "episodic" This includes classes drawing on invited guest lectures, projects within courses, and Commons-sponsored meetings of classes with similar foci from different disciplines
- 3) Informal: This includes symposia, interest/ reading groups, talks, outreach programs etc.

We believe that all of these programs and initiatives have greatly enhanced intellectual life on campus, and we encourage the college to take these ideas further by helping to overcome certain impediments and supporting new initiatives. As we have moved into a globalized world, departmental compartmentalization (or “silo thinking”) is no longer an approach that can do justice to the issues we need to discuss and tackle as an academic community. Moreover, when our students leave, many of them will work in environments where they will need, and be expected to, show knowledge in a variety of areas. ID work responds to such changed realities and enables our students to develop their intellectual skills alongside their technological and social ones in this direction. We see, therefore, both a desire and a need for more interdisciplinary opportunities. Unless the College incentivizes and encourages such opportunities, however, they are unlikely to flourish.

Current impediments to more interdisciplinary work on campus

One theme of our discussions revolved around the risk we take when we engage in interdisciplinary work. The territory we explore by conducting interdisciplinary inquiries is less “charted” than a strictly disciplinary one is, and assessing interdisciplinary work, either our students’ or our colleagues’ during reviews is a complex undertaking that needs preparation and institutional backing. We identified some of the impediments to more interdisciplinary work as follows:

- 1) The “dilettante” problem: to conduct successful ID work and research, the involved disciplines need to be well understood by the faculty member, including specific methods, approaches, and tools. Few colleagues possess such training in more than one field (younger colleagues more so than older colleagues), this is a special problem when it comes to ID senior theses
- 2) Lack of recognition/ fear of adverse effects on evaluations, contract renewals/ tenure/ promotion, especially in younger/ untenured colleagues
- 3) Resistance of some chairs to support ID work by allocating dept. faculty to such projects/ courses, esp. in depts. with high enrollments (strain on resources)
- 4) Culture of “territoriality” (similar to 3)
- 5) Disappointing previous experiences and initiatives (Harvard initiative, Spencer Foundation initiative, Breadloaf discussion 2007 did not really go anywhere)
- 6) Lack of contact/ dialogue between faculty so that synergies could be discovered and developed. How can two faculty members exchange ideas and methodologies if they have not already developed a mutual trust through social interactions?

Remedies?

To address and possibly remedy these problems, we suggest the following initiatives:

- 1) Incentivize ID teaching (in the order of “quick feasibility” as we see it):
 - * create a different student evaluation form for ID courses
 - * offer J-Term workshop on ID teaching in exchange for a J-Term off to colleagues interested in teaching an ID class later on (model: CCSRE Workshop)
 - * make ID teaching count favorably in reviews etc.
 - * offer grants to professors/ students who engage in ID summer research
 - * expand grant opportunities for ID teaching (like Mellon grant)
 - * find/ offer grants for faculty to get training in second field of interest (=expand what the Whiting Fellowship offers)

- 2) Facilitate ID teaching and work (again, in the order of feasibility as we see it)
 - * create curricular ID interest groups such as “Humanities and Sciences” (→ division A + division B) to work on productive intersections, also in conjunction with a possible development of the Adjunct Major as a new curricular template (see below)
 - * create venues for contact and dialogue between colleagues to discover overlap in interests (→ Faculty Spring Symposium, parallel to Student Spring Symposium? social events; encourage class visits by faculty in other departments)
 - * reintroduce (Faculty) Reading Groups as a way for colleagues to meet over shared interests
 - * encourage more ID work in J-Term as a way to “test” and introduce such courses into the curriculum
 - * facilitate more exchange between Middlebury College and its various (new) entities as faculty’s research interest warrant (help colleagues and students spend summer in Monterey close to Center for Non-Proliferation Studies; facilitate more integration between language departments here and Translation Studies Program at MIIS; publicize better teaching and lecturing opportunities in various entities (LS, Breadloaf, Schools Abroad)

Concrete suggestions/ recommendations for implementation

No initiative can be successful unless it has institutional backing. We therefore consider our plea to lend more official support to ID work on campus the precondition for the following concrete curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular suggested initiatives. We believe that an official endorsement of ID work on campus will enhance and further develop the climate of intellectual freedom and curiosity and realize even better the enormous potential that Middlebury’s resources—institutional and human—represent. Since we saw it as one of our tasks to strengthen our program without posing additional strains on financial and human resources on campus, our main interest is in consolidating and connecting initiatives that are already underway. If we do suggest the creation of a new major (the so-called adjunct major, see below), it is in the spirit of such consolidation, not to ask for a quantitative expansion of our academic offerings. We believe that the creation of such a new model is possible without expanding the size of the faculty, and it

could very well be that some of our suggestions could help alleviate staffing and enrollment issues in some of the more overenrolled department on campus.

1) Curricular suggestions (in no particular order)

a) Creation of an Adjunct Major (see the attached proposal for the Adjunct Major model): the adjunct major allows for a targeted interdisciplinary line of inquiry. It takes its starting point from the question: What are meaningful interdisciplinary connections between discipline A and B and thus firmly roots interdisciplinary work in meaningful lines of inquiries and methods. In this respect, it varies greatly from either the Joint or Double Major model as the Adjunct major requires students to study methods and theories underlying their interdisciplinary inquiries (instead of a more parallel approach). The template for the Adjunct Major may allow for the creation of courses of study in Performance Studies or SIA (see below), among others.

b) The concrete creation of the SIA (Social Inquiry and Analysis Major in the context of the Adjunct Major model, see attached proposal)

c) Allow for a limited number of department-free/ college courses, possibly including a new non-program specific tag that reflects and acknowledges new ways of learning/ acquiring knowledge, e.g. through project learning etc. (PROJ)

d) Encourage departments to take a closer look at their major requirements—would cross-overs with other departments benefit the student's education in a subject/ as a major? (the example of the new, overhauled major in Studio Art, some language departments)

e) Find a better and more prominent place for ID offerings in course catalogue

f) Invite FYSE to integrate discussions about disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, revisit the way in which writing is integrated in teaching across campus, especially FYSE

As a side note: the topic of the FYSE program came up a number of times in our discussions. As we understand the concept, FYSEs are ideally courses that offer our new students a “first contact” with ID work; however, we consider this problematic on various levels (because some colleagues engage in this more than others, mostly because students are not even ready to engage in strict **disciplinary** work when they come here and need a more focused and slender approach to their introduction to college writing and academic work here). We strongly encourage the college community to engage in a campus-wide discussion about this program, its goals, its implementation and everyone's adherence to these goals and ideals.

2) Co-curricular suggestions

a) Identify an annual ID topic for a campus-wide, year-long initiative well in advance (maybe poll First Year students at the end of their first year?) for a college-wide annual ID “Topic of the Year”, organize a roster of events/ contributions: (team-taught or individual) courses, lectures,

events, trips, readings etc. (model: Rutgers U, Language Division's Symposia in the early 2000s, Clifford Symposium, but large version); ask each faculty member/ department to contribute to course offerings within this program at least once every x years (x = 3 – 4?)

b) Have a session or series of sessions about that particular theme at Spring Symposium

Conclusion

We believe that most of the suggestions in this document are inspired by the great work that is already done on this campus, and some of our ideas simply try to highlight and shape more clearly synergies and connections that are already there. We hope to encourage members of the Middlebury community—colleagues and students alike—to pursue such a preexisting interest. These suggestions are not intended to replace any of the excellent disciplinary work that happens on this campus, and we fully respect every colleague's right to refrain from engaging in such inquiries. But a rising demand for more interdisciplinary work, often coming from our students, has been one of the driving forces behind creating this Task Force in the first place, and it is with this mandate in mind that we respectfully submit these suggestions to the administration for full discussion with the Middlebury community.

Appendices

App.1: Proposal for the creation of a new Adjunct Major (Template, Kareem Khalifa et al.)

App. 2: Proposal for a new program in Social Inquiry and Analysis (Kareem Khalifa)