

Consideration of Challenges & Barriers: Inter-Trans-Disciplinary Teaching and Learning

Introduction

While the benefits of inter- and trans-disciplinary courses and programs to students and faculty are well-documented, challenges and barriers should be considered up front by those considering this direction.

Instructor Viewpoint

Perceptions and Evaluations:

Depending on the areas involved in an inter- or trans-disciplinary development initiative, there may be concerns regarding how this activity will be perceived and ultimately evaluated by colleagues.

- ⇒ Before initiating a new inter- trans-disciplinary course/program, discussions within all units involved are critical in order to ensure awareness and appreciation of the intended direction. Faculty involved should clearly explain the nature and extent of their work in this regard when describing their contributions in their CVs.

Workload:

Concerns have been expressed by faculty regarding the potential extra workload involved in pursuing collaborative teaching efforts.

- ⇒ It is important that a large enough core of faculty from all involved units is available in order to ensure that inter- trans-disciplinary courses/programs are feasible and also sustainable.

Administrative Viewpoint

Resources and Processes:

There is a lack of clarity regarding how funding will flow for inter- trans-disciplinary courses and programs. This impacts necessary teaching release for course and program development, and time dedicated for course offerings.

- ⇒ Faculty time commitments to such activities will need to be approved by all units included. Thus, there needs to be broad acknowledgement that inter- trans-disciplinary directions have value and that this attitude will be sustained. In addition, the usual approval processes do not currently request identification of whether a proposed course or program is inter- trans-disciplinary. Having this included in checklists could indirectly promote this direction as valued.

Recognition:

Formal recognition of inter- trans-disciplinary efforts is needed for instructors involved.

- ⇒ Tenure/promotion/evaluation criteria should be reviewed to identify any implicit bias against such initiatives and modified where necessary.

Student Viewpoint

Interest and Motivation:

Students who are focussed on a specific discipline may avoid inter- trans-disciplinary courses in their area because they are perceived to be not as relevant to their degree program as discipline-specific courses. In addition, inter- trans-disciplinary courses may not be considered as electives given a lack of familiarity with this type of learning model.

- ⇒ It must be made clear in course outlines and other communications with students how an inter- trans-disciplinary course meets the learning objectives as a required degree component or elective element. Indicating how students will be supported through this type of possibly new experience should be clear. Overall, convincing students up front of the benefits of an inter- trans-disciplinary approach is needed.