

Interdisciplinarity@WMU- Phase One planning Template

- 1. Brief Overview:** Provide a brief overview of the proposed interdisciplinary initiative. What types of questions would the initiative ask? What types of complex problems would it seek to solve?

This proposed new unit would gather under the same umbrella all current units and departments at WMU from the traditional humanities disciplines, while developing programmatic initiatives exploring global interdisciplinary perspectives. Examples of schools of this nature are common among our peer institutions.

- 2. Impacted units:** What existing units, programs, and colleges would be involved in the proposed initiative? What other possibilities for collaboration across campus or in the broader community might exist now or in the future?

The School of Humanities and Global Studies will bring together English, World Literatures and Languages, Spanish, Comparative Religion, the Institute for Intercultural and Anthropological Studies, History, Philosophy, Medieval Institute and Art History. Global Studies (now an interdisciplinary center without dedicated faculty) would be supported by the School but continue outreach to other departments, such as Economics, Political Science, Environmental Sciences and other Colleges.

The School will be led by a Director. Initially, current departments will retain lighter administrative structures and identities, led by associate directors. Faculty governance functions now performed by departmental committees, such as Tenure and Promotion, curriculum review or assessment could be shared within the larger School, while specific concerns would be addressed by the disciplines.

- 3. Impact on teaching, learning, and curricula:** Describe the anticipated impact of the proposed initiative on teaching, learning, and curricula. How might this initiative help to grow enrollment, including by reaching new audiences of learners through continuing education, dual enrollment, or professional certification? How will the proposed initiative positively impact the training of undergraduate and graduate students? How does it enhance our institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion?

When faculty members are part of the same unit, true interdisciplinarity is more likely to flourish. Courses now taught by one department can more easily be included in other programs, enhancing enrollment, especially in upper division courses. Programs now suffering from chronic and unsustainable low enrollment could seek to enlarge their focus and their appeal by offering a wider range of courses taken from other disciplines.

Building on efforts already under way with the Humanities Center, scholars in diverse fields in Humanities will increasingly share their research and methods, and be better able to discern

areas of fruitful collaboration. Thematic courses can be built drawing on expertise by various disciplines. Examples of this can be found at Rice University School of Humanities, which has developed several Big Questions courses using the prefix HUMA. Courses offered this year includes: HUMA 126: What is the Meaning of Death? HUMA 127: What is Hate? Etc. These courses could be designed to be required in majors from the new unit. Team-teaching among colleagues of various disciplines now separated by departmental boundaries can yield innovative approaches.

More targeted courses in the humanities could be developed to address the needs of continuing education and early college.

WMU's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion would be well served in a unit including, among others, Africana studies, Comparative Religion, Anthropology, Spanish, and World Languages and Literatures. The synergies produced by the proximity of scholars in these fields and others would enhance our course offerings. The possibility of future cluster hires in these fields, possibly generated by the Montaintop initiative, or other welcome developments in hiring, would bring us further to these goals.

- 4. Impact on research and creative activity:** Describe the anticipated impact of the proposed initiative on research and creative activity. How will this initiative promote discovery and creative scholarship? How might it result in increased external funding?

Some of this has been alluded to earlier. Bringing together scholars of humanities will allow for a greater circulation of research and scholarly pursuits and is likely to inspire new ones. Interdisciplinary teams of scholars are more likely to successfully seek funding from federal sources, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, which is already defined along these lines, but also from private foundation and community-based funding sources as we can draw from more disciplines to respond to community needs.

- 5. Efficiencies and/or cost savings:** How might the proposed initiative contribute to increased efficiencies and/or cost savings, for example by reducing administrative positions (e.g. chairs/directors), sharing staff support services and/or by sharing facilities?

The new unit will replace 8 Chairs by one director at a substantial cost saving. Associate directors would return to faculty status with course releases and a smaller compensation, especially for summer work. Our administrative support has suffered greatly during the last budget cuts; combining actual skill sets without additional attrition would allow the return to a level of efficiency in administrative support that is eluding us now. Future attrition of faculty members by retirement is less likely to result in programmatic losses.

- 6. Impact on course offerings and workload:** At present, proposed initiatives will only be feasible and sustainable if they can be supported by existing resources, including instructional capacity, faculty and staff time, and facilities. Will the proposed initiative streamline existing course or program offerings? Could the initiative help create more equitable and sustainable workload for faculty, for example, by reducing the need to offer under enrolled courses, reducing the frequency of course offerings or eliminating the need to teach some courses?

This proposal builds on existing structures and departments. Enhancing professional proximity is more likely to result in a definition of common goals. While this proposal does not in itself streamline existing courses or program offerings, it provides a pathway to discuss them and

bring about synergies and more sustainable program collaborations without jettisoning outright valuable programs and offerings that make WMU attractive and competitive. Sustainable programs to be developed in common will bring about both better enrolled courses by reducing course duplication between disciplines, and sustainable teaching workloads that are simply essential to maintain our research status.

- 7. Additional Information:** What additional information would you like to provide in support of this proposal?

I envision this proposal as a long-term unit. But it is also possible to imagine it as a medium term unit, allowing for an ongoing discussion of interdisciplinary exploration, while retaining flexibility and possible outcomes. It is important to get this right. If other configurations within the School of Humanities and Global Studies emerge, there would be a natural space to continue the discussion and ensure that our future academic structures reflect the aspirations of the larger number of faculty members.

8. Contact

Vincent Desroches, World Languages and Literatures