

USC ADDRESS TO THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

JANUARY 24, 2013

Joyce Tolliver, UI-Urbana

On behalf of the University Senates Conference, I'd like to address the Board today about how University scholars engage in cross-disciplinary and cross-campus collaboration, and how we might do this better.

Collaboration across disciplines is becoming more and more necessary to the way we carry out research today. Disciplinary boundaries in the Academy have become permeable over the past couple of decades, and a consequence of today's interdisciplinarity is that researchers not only want but need to work more closely than ever before with colleagues who have different expertise and skill sets. Moreover, research that is oriented toward solving real world problems is almost inevitably interdisciplinary in nature, because most world problems are multifaceted. The big human problems – health, education, the environment, and so on – all have scientific, social, economic, *and* psychological dimensions. We can't understand them, or respond to them, without a multifaceted, multidisciplinary approach.

Collaborative research happens in a variety of ways on our campuses. Two scholars in the same field might write a book or an article together, or groups of researchers from different areas might come together to research one topic, along the lines of what happens at centers like the Beckman Institute, the Institute for Health Research and Policy, or the Center for State Policy and Leadership. We also have multiple partnerships with universities around the world to develop particular areas of research. And of course teams of faculty members and their students form partnerships

with representatives from industry to do research with practical applications--such as the work done at the Research Park or the planned UI Labs.

Teaching is also often enriched when it's done in collaboration, whether it's by inviting guest lecturers to our classes who are from other departments, campuses, or universities, or whether it's team-teaching, in which two colleagues with different areas of expertise teach a course together. Imagine, for instance, a course on science fiction taught by a literary scholar *and* an expert in quantum physics; or a course on stress taught by a *group* of professors, including, say, a professor of molecular biology, a sociologist, an historian, and a professor of pharmacology. In this kind of course, not only do students learn about a variety of disciplines and different ways of understanding, but the professors also learn from each other. This sort of learning makes students want to come to our campuses, and also reflects the way knowledge is created in the real world.

Our three campuses do a lot of collaborative research, but both in research and in teaching, we are still missing opportunities for more. So why *don't* we do more collaborative research and teaching?

There are some real impediments, some of which the University probably can't do much about on its own. The biggest of these is a deeply seated culture in some disciplines that still assumes a model of scholarship and teaching based on the idea of the lone genius or the academic superstar. In these fields, articles and books published in collaboration with others count for *less* when it's time to evaluate applications for promotion and tenure or for salary raises, so there is actually a disincentive to do collaborative research. There is a famous article in organizational theory called "On the

Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B” by Steven Kerr. This may be one of those instances.

But there are three impediments that *are* more within our power to address: budgetary policies, lack of infrastructure, and lack of communication.

A primary impediment related to budgetary policies has to do with how we give academic departments credit for teaching and research. On the teaching side, departmental budgets are apportioned partly based on how many students enroll in that department's courses, so departments end up competing for students. In the example I mentioned of a cross-disciplinary course on world hunger, if only one faculty member is officially in charge of the course, the other faculty members involved would basically be donating their personal time to help teach "other people's" students, and their respective departments would not benefit at all. This is a big problem within campuses, and an even bigger problem across campuses.

On the research side, there is a general lack of infrastructure that would allow researchers and teachers to meet and develop projects: there are really very few opportunities for faculty members from our three campuses to interact with each other face to face or even virtually. Transportation between campuses usually comes at a faculty member's cost and inconvenience. Cross-campus communication resources exacerbate this problem: while each campus has its own newspaper with news of research and teaching advances of its faculty members, the University as a whole has no cross-campus news outlet.

I would like to suggest some potential solutions.

First, to address the problem of incentives, we might revive a program that the VPAA's office sponsored several years ago, in which small seed grants for cross-campus research programs were provided on a competitive basis. This was a great program, one that I myself benefited from when I helped organize a cross-campus symposium in my area of research and then published the collected research in a book I co-edited with a colleague from the Chicago campus. We might also think about how we use physical space: are there physical spaces on the campuses where faculty members gather informally, and reasons to go there? While we wait for high-speed rail, are there other ways to reduce the cost and inconvenience of cross-campus travel? Are there reasonably-priced, conveniently-located overnight accommodations for faculty and student scholars to spend a day or so with their colleagues on other campuses--and if not, are there potential partnerships with local hotels or B & Bs?

Nothing beats face to face interaction, but scholarly groups can also work virtually. Maybe we could think creatively about setting up better structures for cross-campus virtual networks, which could also be used to spread the news about research and teaching advances on and across the three campuses.

We might do more of the kind of collaborative teaching I've described if team-taught courses counted as a real course for both professors, at least the first time a course is taught, or if small amounts of research funding could be allocated for those who guest lecture in courses structured like the one I mentioned on stress. It might be time to take yet another look at possible tweaks to the Instructional Unit system, this time specifically with an eye to encouraging teaching collaborations.

Even if we can't change the "lone genius" culture of some disciplines single-handedly, we *can* take a leadership role in turning that culture around by taking a look at our promotion and tenure practices and rewards systems to reconsider aspects of them that might inadvertently discourage collaboration; and we might explicitly encourage *teams* of scholars to apply for internal grants like the ones offered by my campus's Research Board. We can also find inspiration in initiatives like the Urbana campus's Intersect graduate program, in which humanists and scientists research neurodisciplines together.

Finally, a caveat: there are core disciplinary areas where scholars and teachers work very effectively on their own. Collaboration is not an end in itself, and it's not the *only* way to do good teaching or research. But in the many cases in which it *can* make teaching and research stronger, we should be doing everything we can to enable it.

Thank you.