

Proposal for the DePaul Collaboratory for Interdisciplinary Research, Scholarship and Curricular Innovation (CIRSCI)

Version 1.1

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Innovation through Collaboration

The Vision 2018 Strategic Plan specifically calls for interdisciplinary initiatives. Objective 1c compels the university to “Support collaboration among and between faculty and encourage the development of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary partnerships and programs.” Objective 5c also highlights the importance of investment in the creation of new curricula, stating that the university should “Strategically invest in new academic program development to capitalize on marketplace opportunities and broaden overall revenue mix.”

One of DePaul’s key advantages relative to its competitors is flexibility – the ability to deploy new programs in response to changes in the higher education landscape. 25% of DePaul’s enrollment growth over the past decade came from programs that did not exist 10 years ago. Despite that track record, there is strong evidence that DePaul could be even more effective at fostering innovation. The Provost’s Innovation Task Force identified a number of problems that negatively impact DePaul’s ability to innovate with respect to the curriculum. One major concern is the difficulty that faculty members face in attempting to work across college lines. Colleges have developed a “silo” mentality in which disciplinary and college boundaries are taken as primary. Recent decreases in enrollment, which have directly affected college budgets, have reinforced the tendency to view the contest for university resources as a zero-sum game -- one unit’s gain is another’s loss.

These internecine disputes put us entirely at odds with the societal changes that swirl outside the university. Beyond our walls, disciplinary boundaries have lost much of their meaning: employers care what value an employee brings to their operation, not how their expertise is labeled; an entrepreneur must fill a dozen roles in order to succeed; even students going to graduate school in a particular discipline often find that interdisciplinary approaches are highly prized.

There are many faculty members at DePaul eager to work across disciplinary and college boundaries. The digital humanities working

group is one example that has attracted scholars from a variety of academic units. The Rosalind Franklin research initiative has done likewise. These efforts, however piecemeal, show that the will and the numbers are there for richly collaborative approaches to innovation. That said, DePaul has yet to establish coherent and sustained support for interdisciplinary work.

Three ingredients are needed in order to bring sustained interdisciplinary innovation to DePaul.

- First is a relaxation of the strictures that bind faculty and their courses to particular departments and colleges, and the rules that limit how student credits can be counted towards university requirements. Relaxing these outdated restrictions is essential for offering interdisciplinary courses. Otherwise, each new attempt at curricular innovation will require a protracted negotiation at the college level to permit specific exceptions.
- The second ingredient is faculty time. Innovation does not come for free – the interplay of ideas and methodologies that gives rise to new courses, programs and research projects takes time, effort and deliberation to bring to fruition. As noted in the Innovation Task Force Report, the status quo effectively penalizes faculty members for curricular innovation because there is no particular incentive to undertake the labors involved, and there is significant attendant risk because the implementation of such innovations is so difficult to achieve. Thus, the opportunity cost of collaboration and innovation at DePaul is prohibitively high, hampering the university's efforts to explore new forms of scholarly and pedagogical activity.
- The third ingredient is shared space. Interdisciplinary innovation thrives when informal interaction is supported. If faculty members do not interact across disciplinary boundaries, they will not be able to innovate across those boundaries. DePaul should take its cue from enterprises in the private sector that value innovation: high-tech startups and similar companies. These companies create work environments that support and enhance informal interaction between knowledge workers, knowing that these interactions are a key source of profitable ideas. The Collaboratory, ideally located on the Lincoln Park campus, would provide space for affiliated faculty members, students and the university community at large to work, teach and interact across disciplinary lines.

This proposal addresses all three of these needs. In particular, it envisions a “collaboratory” in which interdisciplinary projects large and small can be housed, supported, and nurtured. As the name implies, collaboration and experimentation would be key to its mission. The unit would have its own web presence and IT infrastructure so that faculty and students could easily create and deploy electronic resources. It would offer its own courses so that innovations in curriculum and instruction can be piloted. The collaboratory would offer course releases to faculty fellows working on research and curriculum projects so that the time and incentive is present to produce innovation. It would also provide a focus for corporate and foundation support, as it would be a natural environment for cross-cutting projects. We envision a federated structure incorporating affiliated centers that would retain their existing organization and charge while operating across unit lines.

Mission

The mission of the Collaboratory for Interdisciplinary Research, Scholarship, and Curricular Innovation (CIRSCI) is to support faculty research and collaboration across disciplinary and college boundaries. This support takes multiple forms, including:

- Support for curricular innovation: The collaboratory will enable groups of faculty members to work together on new courses and programs without the hurdles associated with cross-college scheduling, budgeting, and accounting.
- Support for interdisciplinary research and creative activities: The collaboratory will bring together faculty scholars across units to work on innovative scholarship and will support Research Fellows, Research Staff and Student Affiliates to consult with faculty on a wide variety of research-related issues.
- Support for student projects: CIRSCI will provide space and support for cross-disciplinary student projects including matching student interests with available projects, managing stakeholder interests and assuring continuity over time.
- Support for technology: CIRSCI will provide independent IT infrastructure for hosting applications, databases, code and asset repositories, and other needs of faculty and CIRSCI projects. It also will provide state-of-the-art AV facilities to support the rapid production and effective public dissemination of high-quality multimedia materials based on the scholarly work of fellows (e.g., webcasts, podcasts, short films, motion data graphics, etc.).
- Support for corporate and community outreach: CIRSCI will provide a venue for organizing and managing projects sponsored by external organizations.

Structure

In addition to serving as a center in its own right, we envision CIRSCI as an umbrella organization that federates a number of interdisciplinary initiatives that already exist across DePaul and others that might arise. For example, in LAS, the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) supports behavioral and social science researchers to design research projects and obtain grant funding. Another example is the Data Mining and Predictive Analytics Center (DaMPA), formed by faculty from CDM and BUS, which sponsors workshops with local companies and helps make matches between students who need research projects and faculty members who need collaborators. These entities could become part of CIRSCI, retaining their current organization. But by virtue of being part of CIRSCI, their circles of influence will become broader and their work will have greater impact throughout DePaul.

The key individuals in CIRSCI's collaborative environment would be faculty fellows of different types – see descriptions below. We expect faculty with mutual interest in a collaborative project to apply together and serve as fellows together.

Roles

Advisory Committee:

Two members each from CDM, BUS, CMN, LAS, CSH. Provost (or representative) and an ORS representative, ex-officio. Members are chosen by college faculty and serve for two-year staggered terms with a maximum of two consecutive terms. The advisory committee reviews proposals for research, curriculum and teaching fellows and assists the director in setting the priorities for CIRSCI.

Director:

This is a half-time faculty position, appointed by the Provost with the approval of Faculty Council. The Director serves a three-year term with a maximum of one renewal.

Affiliated Center Directors:

The directors of affiliated centers retain their existing roles and compensation from outside of CIRSCI.

Research Fellow:

Receives one course release per quarter for a maximum of three consecutive quarters in exchange for consulting in their area of expertise, engaging in interdisciplinary research, and / or supervising student projects. When there are positions available, CIRSCI will publish its needs

for Research Fellows and solicit applications, which will be reviewed competitively.

Curriculum Fellow:

Receives one course release per quarter for a maximum of three consecutive quarters in exchange for curriculum development work. When there are positions available, CIRSCI will publish its needs for Curriculum Fellows and solicit applications, which will be reviewed competitively.

Teaching Fellow:

Receives one course release for a quarter in which an interdisciplinary course is taught, typically in conjunction with one or more other Teaching Fellows. Proposals for CIRSCI courses will be accepted on an on-going basis, and reviewed competitively.

Faculty Affiliate:

Faculty affiliates work on CIRSCI projects at a lower level of effort than would be expected of a Research, Curricular or Teaching Fellow. Affiliates receive credit towards CIRSCI release time at a rate commensurate with demands of their project work, but not more than 1/3 credit per quarter. Affiliates would typically be recruited by the Director to work on particular projects when and where their expertise is needed.

Staff:

An ideal staffing level for the collaborator would consist of one full-time staff person for project management and general administration; one half-time IT person to develop and maintain systems, tools and resources; and one half-time time staff member for grant writing and corporate outreach. It may be possible to make use of underutilized staff from other centers so that no new staff lines are required.

Curriculum

CIRSCI will offer its own courses and will have its own dedicated classroom space. These courses will count for degree credit either within particular majors or by satisfying liberal studies requirements. Appropriate credit will be determined in cooperation with the Committee for Curriculum and Programs or the Liberal Studies Council, as appropriate.

CIRSCI will have a limited number of courses that it can offer, so a given course can only be offered twice within CIRSCI. Subsequent offerings must be given within normal curricular structures.

Space

CIRSCI should have its own workspace, specifically designed to enhance interaction and collaboration, as found in incubators like 1871 (<http://www.1871.com/>) in Chicago. Center fellows and staff would have dedicated desk areas. Common areas, meeting rooms and flexible work spaces would be available for collaboratory projects and affiliated faculty and students. Ideally, affiliated centers would be co-located with CIRSCI. CIRSCI should have a reconfigurable lecture / classroom / event space in which to offer classes, presentations, etc.

In the interim, it may be possible to run the collaborator in a “pop-up” fashion, locating it where available space arises, such as in the old theater building.

IT Support

CIRSCI will have its own IT infrastructure for supporting its projects including the creation and maintenance of server-side applications, databases and other resources and tools.

Implementation plan

We propose that CIRSCI operate for an initial 3-year pilot period, and at that time, a review of its mission and effectiveness would be conducted.

We envision forming CIRSCI in the Spring of 2014, and moving into appropriate space over the summer. We would start with 2 fellows each for curriculum and research. We would add additional curriculum and teaching fellows each quarter up to 12 fellows/quarter by Spring 2015. As curriculum would be the main initial focus, we anticipate there would be a 2:1 ratio of teaching and curriculum fellows to research fellows.

We anticipate that the Social Science Research Center will be the first affiliated center and expect to recruit other centers as plans for CIRSCI move forward.

Budget

The major cost for CIRSCI is release time for the faculty involved. For the first year, we would require 21 quarters of release time: 3 for the director, 6 for research fellows and 12 for curriculum / teaching fellows. We anticipate that it will be possible to reallocate existing staff so that no additional staff lines are required.

Relation to other units

We expect that this proposal will generate opposition from the deans of various colleges. The silo mentality mentioned above is particularly focused at the top of the administrative units in the university. Deans may believe that they are losing control of curricular change, a process that has traditionally been very closely associated with traditional unit boundaries, and of the centers that they have traditionally controlled.

However, there are several points that may allay such concerns. First is to note that CIRSCI is not intended to be a permanent home for any course or program. It is an incubator in which new approaches can be tried out. As described in the "Curriculum" section above, successful innovations must be transitioned back into the appropriate colleges and the regular curriculum. Second is that CIRSCI can be of tremendous utility to deans in that it provides a site in which to conduct curricular experiments that they cannot currently perform, with low cost of failure. Lack of resources for curricular development was a key complaint from deans on the Innovation Task Force, and the Collaboratory would help fill that gap.