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Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

The Ideal Course and the Dream Team

By James R. Davis, University of Denver

Interdisciplinary courses require continuing collaboration and new roles in the classroom.

THE IDEAL INTERDISCIPLINARY course begins with a great idea. Usually interdisciplinary courses are designed around themes (romanticism, for example), problems (managing wetlands, for instance), or comparisons (Einstein compared to Freud, or perhaps Freud compared to Marx).

Planning is paramount in creating an interdisciplinary course because the teachers doing the planning are actually inventing a new subject. They spend a lot of time determining the scope and sequence of the course, how breadth and depth will be balanced, and what the interdisciplinary learning outcomes will be, such as critical comparison, integration of diverse positions, and assimilation of multiple viewpoints.

The planners pay attention to choosing and using the most appropriate teaching strategies, and they build in assessment techniques from the beginning. Sometimes the structure of the course, with its many players and experiences, becomes quite elaborate and requires a manager of logistics

Collaborating on different levels

The key word is collaboration, but the amount and type of collaboration can vary. Four areas in which collaboration is important—planning, content integration, teaching, and testing—may evolve rather different levels of collaboration.

The team may work collaboratively in planning a year-long course but may delegate teaching to serial appearances by teachers unit by unit; or the team may do less up-front collaboration on content integration because they hammer out how the content will be integrated, week-by-week, as they are teaching together in the same classroom. Thus, the level of collaboration in these four areas may be high or low, but the course may still be thought of as interdisciplinary.

The collaboration in content integration is probably the most difficult. Think of it this way: Instead of bringing together the best players in one sport (such as basketball), the interdisciplinary dream team consists of players from baseball, hockey, soccer, basketball, and volleyball; and their job is to invent a new game.

All of the members have their own expertise, viewpoints, and outlooks. They value their discipline for the perspective it brings on a narrow range of phenomena—this is partly why they chose their field—and they may not be accustomed to listening to and considering other perspectives seriously.

Furthermore, the techniques for building bridges across disciplines or creating new conceptual structures may not be obvious. If the team goes to the trouble—and it is considerable trouble—of designing an interdisciplinary course, the contribution and relationship of the disciplines or professional fields involved needs to be clear, if not from the start, at least eventually. In this way, students grasp the essence and value of the new game and become eager players themselves.

New roles for team teaching

If the dream team survives the challenge of planning an interdisciplinary course, the next step is to learn to teach as a team.

The planning group can decide to appear serially, of course, but that sidesteps the challenges and opportunities of working together in the same classroom.

If two or more teachers decide to teach as a team, they must learn to contribute without always being—to continue the sports metaphor—the ball hog who scores the most points. Teamwork requires finding new and comfortable roles.

For example, the model learner co-teacher would demonstrate effective learning habits, functioning as a student sitting among other students, participating intelligently, having done the reading, contributing brilliant insights, and knowing when to speak and listen.

The expert observer offers occasional comments on the content of the discussion or nature of the process that is unfolding in the class.

The co-lecturer shares the lectern and either serially or in a true dialogue adds a second perspective to the topic.

The panel member joins other teachers or guests as one resource on the day's topic.

The discussion leader may lead a break-out group after a lecture or inquiry.

The co-discussion leader may facilitate a discussion side by side with a colleague in the same classroom, and a case-co-facilitator may bring a second or third level of analysis to a case study.

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Fall Mini-Term Begins - Oct 29
Spring Registration (enrolled) - Nov 5
Open House - Nov 17
Thanksgiving Break - Nov 21-23
Faculty Meeting - Nov 28
Spring Registration (new) - Dec 3

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September 3	March 4
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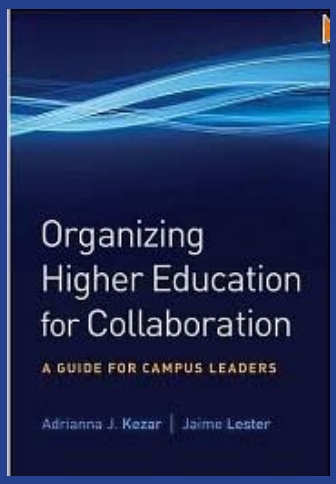
Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide for Campus Leaders



In the face of ongoing challenges such as declining resources, financial downturns, changing demographics, and staff turnover, Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration shows that collaboration is the key to addressing these myriad issues.

Collaboration is pivotal to successful institutional change and learning, and this much-needed resource provides guidance and advice for college and university leaders and faculty who want to know what it takes to reorganize their institutions in order to foster more collaborative work.

Author: Kezar and Jaime Lester
Publisher: Jossey-Bass;
1 edition (February 3, 2009)
ISBN-10: 0470179368
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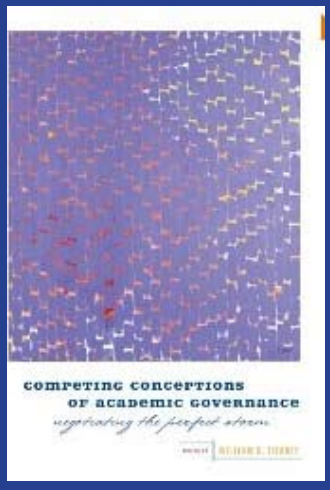
Competing Conceptions of Academic Governance: Negotiating the Perfect Storm



In Competing Conceptions of Academic Governance, William G. Tierney brings together faculty members, administrators, and policy experts to discuss differing views of academic governance at institutional, national, and international levels. Topics include the effects of globalization and the prospect of international accreditation; balancing the entrepreneurial and philosophical goals of higher education; the interaction between state governments and public universities; and the conflicting interests and roles of boards of trustees, administrators, and faculty. Carefully weighing various models and strategies, this volume provides new ways of understanding and addressing the changes that are transforming higher education.

Editor: William G. Tierney
Publisher: The Johns Hopkins University Press
(June 8, 2009)
ISBN-10: 0801892112
ISBN-13: 978-0801892110

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A group-facilitator may organize group activities or assist colleagues with group activities they are employing.

A gadfly—usually self-identified as a devil's advocate—may raise those disturbing questions that drive the discussion to a deeper level.

A resource, at a much more mundane level, may play a nevertheless useful role in fixing broken equipment, making extra copies, or assisting with transportation on a field trip.

Team teachers are constantly inventing new roles and breaking down the stereotypes of what a teacher is supposed to do in the classroom. All of this presupposes a level of cohesion among team members that generates the comfort to be inventive. Although one teacher may take the lead on a particular day, other members of the team need to feel that there is something for them to do that also contributes to the environment that enables learning.

Looking to the future

Although the assumption thus far has been that all members of the team are academic specialists, the teams of the future may be composed of members with other special skills in instructional design, online instruction, information searching, and non-print digital media management.

In other words, the dream team of the future may get even more complex, but just imagine the rich courses that such a team, along with traditional academic specialists, could create.

The dominant paradigm for teaching makes little provision for parceling out fractions of professional time and rewarding complex collaborations, and interdisciplinary courses and team teaching may still be viewed as the work of deviants, but the reinvention of higher education surely requires new practices for teaching and learning. The technological opportunities alone require serious reexamination of the 100-year-old paradigm of working independently as a disciplinary specialist. Besides, it's lonely!

References & Resources

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James R. Davis; The Ideal Course and the Dream Team; www.NEA.org; [http://www.nea.org/home/34957.htm] ; September 18, 2012