

QEP Proposal 3

Title: A Proposal for Interdisciplinary Multi-Semester Cohort Experiences

Summary: I propose a program to encourage and facilitate interdisciplinary study, conversation, and understanding among students, faculty, and staff. New students would be encouraged to opt-in to an interdisciplinary cohort track in a selected theme related to diversity, broadly defined. These themes could include race and ethnic studies; queer studies; disability studies; technology and society; interdisciplinary approaches to health; teaching, learning, and cognition; and others. Each theme would be defined in such a way that it would incorporate aspects of at least four distinct disciplines represented on campus from at least two different colleges.

Rationale/Problem Statement/Growth Opportunity: Most students will pursue careers that do not map neatly onto the academic disciplines that define university structures. Instead, they will be called upon to apply skills and knowledge that they learned to problems and projects that demand a wide array of approaches and collaboration with people that come from very different personal and professional backgrounds. Students often graduate without a clear understanding of the value of degrees that are dissimilar to those they have pursued themselves. Even if they have taken general education courses in other disciplines, those courses often do not make clear connections with students' home departments or career development. Incorporating explicitly interdisciplinary work and relationships into their college experience will help our students translate their academic success into professional and personal success.

Departments on campus often feel that they are competing with one another for scarce resources, rather than seeing themselves as members of a collaborative community that is greater than the sum of its parts. At the same time, faculty and staff sometimes perceive themselves to be at odds. An interdisciplinary faculty and student cohort program would encourage faculty, staff, and students to learn more about how different disciplines and departments contribute knowledge, techniques, and insights into areas that concern all of us as a campus and a broader community. At the same time, it would encourage faculty and staff to understand the ways that all university employees address complex problems from a variety of angles, to appreciate the ways that faculty areas of expertise can inform programming and policy, and to explore how the experiences and areas of expertise represented on the staff can enrich our research and classroom work.

Expected Outcomes/Impact on Student Learning or the Learning Environment: Participation in an interdisciplinary, multi-semester cohort would build community among students and faculty from different departments and even colleges. It would encourage both students and faculty to consider complex issues and problems from a multitude of perspectives, develop skills for communicating outside of disciplinary conventions, and recognize the value of expertise from diverse areas. It would also give new students a community of peers beyond their own departments, facilitating their integration into the university community by increasing the number of connections they make to different parts of the university.

This program would complement the proposed gen ed reimagination, incorporating classes that met gen ed requirements, including the proposed DEI category. Participation in certain cohorts would give students the opportunity to work towards a major or minor related to the interdisciplinary theme (such as WGS, Africana Studies, or Latin American Studies). However, it would also give students who do not have room in their curriculum to complete a minor or who want to pursue a different program of study the chance to explore the benefits of interdisciplinary work and enrich their experience in their chosen major.

Interdisciplinary cohort work also aligns with UTC's core values, including a student-centered culture defined by creativity, inquiry and scholarship, and the embrace of diversity, inclusion, and engagement. Cohort learning that puts students and faculty from different disciplines into conversation about complex problems and ideas would certainly have the potential to "transform lives through meaningful learning experiences"; "embrace diversity, inclusion, and engagement as a path to excellence and societal change"; and "inspire, nurture, and empower scholarship, creativity, discovery, innovation and entrepreneurial initiatives."

Strategies/Actions to be implemented: Each cohort would take a series of four classes to be taken in the first four consecutive semesters of a student's time at UTC, taught by instructors from different disciplines who have opted into the cohort and are committed to collaborating on course development and instruction (though not all courses would necessarily be team taught) and addressing a topic related to the cohort theme. All cohort themes and classes would engage explicitly with questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion broadly defined. Students would be encouraged to bring insights and knowledge from their respective majors/departments/other classes to bear on conversations in the cohort classes and outside the classroom. Each track would culminate in a class that centered on a "real world" problem and a research project that challenged students as a group to approach that problem from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Students would have the opportunity to continue to work on a research project related to the cohort theme in later semesters, possibility culminating in an honors thesis supervised by a team of affiliate faculty members.

Each cohort would be led by a coordinator, who would organize course offerings from teams of instructors (beginning, perhaps, on a model similar to that used in the honors college with successful courses being converted into permanent offerings in a home department or program), coordinate extracurricular activities, and facilitate discussion among cohort members. Coordinators would also serve as secondary mentors/advisors to their cohort students. These cohorts would not necessarily be living and learning communities (which exclude some students and faculty) but would contribute to the same effort to encourage students to form connections with each other and with faculty both in and beyond their major departments.

There would be a professional development aspect of this program as well, with faculty who propose to offer courses in the cohort theme collaborating on curriculum development, programming, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Faculty would be incentivized to design student research opportunities related to the theme and applying methods from more than one discipline. Faculty would also be encouraged to work with staff whose positions involve application of skills and methods from a variety of disciplines to the themes as they occur in "real world" situations.

Students: This program would have an impact on students who elect to participate in their first year as well as students who are not participating, but would benefit from classes populated by students who are participating and are better equipped to bring an informed interdisciplinary approach to all their courses.

Assessment: Measurable outcomes of this program would be the number of students completing a coordinated program of study that complimented, but didn't reproduce, a major field of study; the number of extracurricular events that involved multiple departments and programs in collaboration; the number of students engaged in complex problem solving using a wide array of tools, methods, and knowledge sets from different disciplines; and the number of honors theses that demonstrated interdisciplinary skills.

Resources Needed: Implementing a program like this successfully would require resources to provide compensation or course releases to cohort coordinators, and to permit smaller, sometimes team-taught courses. It would also require a genuine commitment to the notion that complex problems require expertise and input from people with a variety of expertise. However, because many courses could be designed to meet general education requirements, it would not necessarily require more courses overall. Interdisciplinary work is challenging and time-consuming, and if it is to succeed, instructors would need to be compensated for the extra time required to collaborate on course design and instruction. Some new faculty lines could be defined to include interdisciplinary cohort participation, attracting faculty who are experts in a core discipline but able and willing to work in interdisciplinary communities as well.

Research/Best Practices Gathered to Date: