

CAN THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY PARADOX BE SOLVED?

Understanding the appeal of multidisciplinary noncredit areas
that attract students to graduate programs

FEBRUARY 2008



.....

Dorothy A. Durkin
ASSOCIATE DEAN

**Given the human
and social demand
for critical
thinking—
creativity and
diversity—it seems
incumbent upon
us to consider just
how we can make
our teaching
resources more
accessible to
people who live in
a world of fast-
changing,
hyphenated
competencies.**

Scanning any of the projections on emerging trends in employment or technology quickly underscores the rising importance of digital networks, database design and management, computer security, and so on. In the Advance Manufacturing, Biotechnology, Geospatial Technology, Aerospace, and Energy categories, we find burgeoning demand for technicians, engineers, and computer scientists to develop remote sensing, visualization, mapping, tracking, and monitoring systems. They make up the infrastructure that gathers and distributes the data.

Clustered along with these skills on the infrastructure side, we find a host of analytical, semantic, and interpretive disciplines in data analytics, informatics, and information architecture that deal with how to facilitate and organize the interactions between the technology and the people who use it to make decisions. This set, however, is just as likely to be found in occupational sectors like Business Management, Finance, Health Care, Education, Marketing, Media, and so on—wherever humans take direct responsibility for the consequences of outcomes.

Such talents and technologies are being organized to manage the anticipated flood of data from our newly transparent and thoroughly networked society. In the age of GPS, mobile communications, electronic commerce, and social networking, almost everything the ordinary citizen does creates a trail of digital bits precisely to what, when, and where he or she did everything he or she did.

The one thing this evidence doesn't reveal is "why" he or she did what he or she did. For that you need to unlock the knowledge of the Liberal Arts. For that you need to unlock the knowledge of the Liberal Arts—critical thinking, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, logic, and the whole panoply of social sciences.

The paradox is that the people who use such systems are not "simply technicians" or "simply the users of information." To the extent that "information" is "data in context" each actor needs to know more than a little about what the other actors are doing. Turning data into actions, or into policy, requires knowledge not only of the "how," or "what," but also, the "why."

In a fall '08 analysis of our master's students, we found that SCPS noncredit courses were an important source of our candidates in each of our 14 professional degree areas (see Figure A). While the noncredit course in the same topical area as the degree predictably accounted for the largest number of candidates, other courses from outside the

If we consider the "net present value" of students in noncredit programs, there is a compelling argument for continuing to serve as many of them as practicable.

professional area collectively accounted for a nearly equal or slightly larger proportion of new masters students.

The noncredit courses that had the broadest appeal across the various graduate professional areas were in the humanities, career management, foreign language and information technology.

There are, of course, alternative explanations for such patterns. Because our master's candidates are often career changers—people who have not found the satisfaction they hoped for in their initial occupational field, they are looking to validate a transferable competency. Perhaps they worked as a trader in the financial services sector, but are now hoping to move into IT. Completing a graduate certificate in an area where they've acquired practical experience can help to hyphenate their competencies, making them more valuable to a new or existing field. Others have simply discovered a passion for an alternative field and need to fill in the gaps. Whatever it may be, they all seem to have discovered the need for a *unique* professional identity—a personal brand. They do not want to be merely as good as the standards require. They understand that employers 'look for people with more to offer' and that often entails a more complex combination of assets.

Given the human and social demand for critical thinking—creativity and diversity—it seems incumbent upon us to consider just how we can make our teaching resources more accessible to people who live in a world of fast-changing, hyphenated competencies. There are a host of mechanisms, from noncredit courses to diplomas, certificates, dual-degrees, joint degrees, and a plethora of teaching and delivery structures, to provide value to students and society at large.

Collaboration and interdisciplinary efforts have been notoriously difficult to pull off inside the conventional academic program structure. Still there are intercession programs, seminars, conferences, online courses, interdisciplinary capstone projects, study abroad, and many other structures that have become part of the mix, and may be better suited to solving the multidisciplinary paradox.

Doing well, by doing good, the net present value of learners

Recently, we took another look at our non-credit programs. As you can see, several interesting patterns emerge.

- Noncredit programs appear to provide a substantial number of career candidates to all academic divisions;

- The noncredit courses offered by each division substantially support their own degrees (internal growth);
- Noncredit courses offered by academic areas outside the degrees' subject area (external growth) generally provide as many or more degree candidates than noncredit courses in the same degree area;
- The students in the different Centers digital arts and graphic design courses, follow a narrower path choosing Digital Imaging or Graphic Design and Management for graduate work, making little use of courses outside their career focus.

If we consider the "net present value" of students in noncredit programs, there is a compelling argument for continuing to serve as many of them as practicable. The patterns suggest that noncredit programs are a compelling "gateway" for many talented students who are "testing" or "validating" their own long term needs. While noncredit is traditionally a province of continuing education, there is little reason why the same tactic used online or on campus during intersession, couldn't help high school students or undergraduates clarify their own perspectives.

(See Figure A)

FIGURE A

Master's Paths from Non-Degree Beginings																
	Appeal Factor	Construction	Digital Imaging	Fundraising	Global Affairs	GCMT	Hospitality	Human Res.	Intg. Mktg	Mgt. & Sys	PR & CorpCom	Publishing	Real Estate	Sports Business	Tourism & Tvl	
Base number of students enrolled in		121	84	38	258	97	48	207	87	250	133	93	591	86		23
Accounting, Taxation, & Legal Studies	0.07				1											
Arts	0.43	1	1		2			1			1		1			
Career Management	0.71	2			5			6	6	3	5	1	2	2		9
Digital Arts	0.14		15			1										
Film	0.43		5		1	1		2	1			1				
Finance	0.43				4		2		2	4	2		4			
Foreign Language/Translation	0.71	2	4		7	2		2		1	2		1	1		4
Global Affairs	0.5	1			18	1		1	1	1	2					
Graphic & Interior Design	0.43	1	12			9			3	2		1				
Hospitality, Tourism, Sports Mgt.	0.28						10				1			1		4
Humanities	0.78	1	2		2	2		3	1	2	4	1	1	2		
Information Technology	0.71	2	5	3	2	3		1	6	16	2		2			
Management	0.43	1			1			9	1		2		1			
Marketing	0.71		1	3	1	3	2	1	14		10	1		1		
Movies 101	0.21		1								1			1		
Philanthropy/Fundraising	0.21			8							1					
Publishing	0.29										2	2				
Real Estate	0.5	17		3	1		8			2	1		24			
Food & Wine	0.14	1					2									
Psychology	0.07						2									
Range Factor		0.5	0.45	0.2	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.45	0.45	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.4	0.3		0.15
Internal growth		20.57	22.68	3.04	46.44	8.73	5.76	18.63	12.18	40	13.3	1.86	141.84	0.86		0.92
External growth		13.31	15.96	3.42	69.66	12.61	6.72	35.19	18.27	37.5	34.58	4.65	70.92	6.02		2.99
NC Experience		28	46	17	45	22	26	26	35	31	36	7	36	8		17

Notes:

- Appeal Factor: a rating that indicates relative attraction of a given nc course across multiple Graduate Program Areas.
- Range Factor: a rating that indicates tendency of students in a given GPA to look beyond the topic area for additional learning.
- Internal Growth: the estimated number of student in a GPA that took nc in the same academic area.
- External Growth: the estimated number of students in a GPA that took nc course(s) from topical areas outside their GPA.
- NC Experiences: the percentage of students in a given GPA (base) that took an noncredit course prior to enrolling in their graduate program.

Data Source: Brio Data AY05-08