Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning at McMaster: Benefits, Enabling Factors, and Barriers

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from 17 interviews primarily conducted by the MacPherson Institute with McMaster faculty about their experiences with interdisciplinary teaching and program leadership. The purpose of this initiative was to identify perceived benefits of interdisciplinary teaching and learning, factors that enable this work, and factors that inhibit this work.

The report's findings show that benefits are primarily focused on enrichment of the instructor and student experience. The main enabling factors identified were shared values, strong mandates from university leadership, clear and shared expectations, opportunities for connection and community-building, deep disciplinary diversity, and contributions to inclusive teaching and learning. The main inhibiting factors that emerged from the interviews were competition for teaching resources and a reliance on sessional instructors, heavy teaching workloads and the allocation of teaching units, intensive administrative workloads and the need for additional staff support, a lack of institutional recognition and celebration, and institutional isolation and the lack of formal professional development opportunities.

The report concludes with the following recommendations, grouped under three broad themes:

Establish Centralized Structures and Shared Understandings

Participants shared that McMaster's budget model and decentralized structure makes the administration of interdisciplinary teaching and learning experiences challenging. They also pointed to a lack of common definition about what 'interdisciplinary' means and to the need for greater understanding of the benefits of interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

1. **Determine the necessary structures and financial resources for creating a central unit** to help coordinate, administer, support, and sustain interdisciplinary teaching and learning across McMaster.
2. **Develop a shared understanding** of the benefits of interdisciplinary teaching and learning for educators, students, and departments.
3. **Develop a shared definition** of 'interdisciplinary teaching and learning' across McMaster.

4. **Establish an administrative resource repository** (e.g., memoranda of understanding templates) to enable institutional consistency when planning and establishing interdisciplinary teaching and learning opportunities.

Build Community and Capacity

Participants identified a desire to have more connections with others who teach in interdisciplinary contexts and to have more support around curriculum development and course design. They emphasised the importance of community-building as a key factor in initiating and sustaining interdisciplinary work.

5. **Develop facilitation support for programs to have periodic retreats** for high-level discussions, including with senior Faculty leadership, about challenges and successes.
6. **Develop durable networks for educators who are involved in interdisciplinary teaching** to connect with and learn from each other.
7. **Develop a pedagogical resource repository** or other forms of pedagogical support related to curriculum development and course design.

Recognize and Celebrate Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning

Participants perceive a lack of recognition of interdisciplinary teaching in terms of how it is considered for purposes of CP/M and tenure and promotion. They also spoke of a desire to see more institutional celebration of the teaching and learning in which they and their students participate.

8. **Review how individuals' interdisciplinary teaching units are counted and allocated** by departments and Faculties, and how these teaching units are recognized in the CP/M and the tenure and promotion process. Exploration of this recommendation should ensure a specific focus on equity.
9. **Create a new award** for interdisciplinary teaching for instructors to see their work recognized and celebrated by the university.
10. **Host an annual event** (e.g., a symposium or retreat) for instructors to showcase their interdisciplinary teaching achievements and brainstorm solutions to challenges.