Redesigning the University of New Mexico
Task Force 6: Academic Structure and Organization
Draft Report

Alex Lubin, Chair

Task Force 6: Academic Structure and Organization

Task Force Description:

“Like most universities, UNM is discipline-centric in that departments identified by academic disciplines are the fundamental administrative units. While this defines the status quo, it creates both administrative and pedagogical redundancies that consume resources that might otherwise be used to advance UNM’s teaching and research mission. Moreover, it detracts from efforts to move toward more interdisciplinarity in both research and teaching, which is a clear trend in higher education and research-funding institutions. Some universities, most notably Arizona State University, have successfully reduced administrative costs and facilitated interdisciplinary scholarship by combining departments into larger, thematically related schools and programs. The purpose of this task force is to explore, with a focus on UNM’s unique opportunities and strengths, possible reorganization scenarios and to propose a process by which those with a high probability of success will be implemented and assessed.”

Membership:

Alex Lubin, Associate Provost for Faculty Development
Pamela Cheek, Associate Provost for Curriculum and Assessment
Janie Chermack, Economics
Julie Coonrod, Dean, Graduate Studies
Jeremy Edwards, Chemistry
Geraldine Forbes Isais, Dean, School of Architecture and Planning
Melanie Moses, Computer Science
Kymberly Pinder, Dean, College of Fine Arts
Kathy Powers, Political Science
Irene Vasquez, Chair, Chicano/a Studies

Background:

Public universities are currently undergoing discussions about the durability, usefulness, and relevance of colleges and departments, many of which were a product of the post-World War Two, Cold War era public university. This conversation is, in part, a product of economic necessity. Universities are asking whether in a context of diminishing public investment in higher education they can continue to offer all of the programs and majors they once did. Conversations based in economic necessity often look to program consolidation and elimination as means to ensure financial sustainability (see Capaldi)
The University of New Mexico, while in a seeming enduring financial crisis, is not in the position of needing to consolidate or eliminate programs as a means to ensure sustainability. Rather, a smart investment in interdisciplinary research clusters, while not primarily motivated by economic crisis, may yield a more financially-sustainable model. That said, the primary goal of Task Force 6 is to focus on how we might best encourage, incentivize, and programatize interdisciplinary knowledge production given our somewhat inflexible system of departments and colleges.

Our goal is to imagine policies and infrastructure that can encourage and incentivize new forms of knowledge production. This task required serious discussion about how faculty workload and reviews are conducted, how we “count” and value credit-hour production, how we align faculty research with areas of marked-distinction or “grand challenges”, and how we recruit and hire faculty.

Among the questions this task force seeks to answer are the following:

- Does the current configuration of departments and colleges encourage and enable the sort of interdisciplinary knowledge production required to solve “big questions” as well as to produce the sort of skills required for the future?

- What infrastructure and policy revisions would be required to unleash the creative and intellectual energies of faculty who are rooted to a discipline but are also interdisciplinary or even “un-disciplined” in their approach to knowledge production?

- Can a reimagined academic structure align the necessity to create a distinct general education curriculum at UNM as well as areas of distinction in our research productivity? In other words, can we align the core curriculum and our research priorities such that we identify “grand challenges” where UNM can brand itself as a distinct, “destination” University?

- What is a UNM-approach to reorganization, one that draws on OUR areas of research excellence and concern. We don’t want to merely copy what our regional competitors are doing in the areas of reorganization – we are looking for UNM-specific reorganization.

Ideas and Proposals:

Revisit and adopt many or most of the recommendations of the “2013 Report of the Provost’ Committee on ID Studies” (see appendix)

- Offer seed funding to interdisciplinary and cross-college teams of faculty researchers interested in developing an interdisciplinary research cluster that incorporates a curriculum (including a core course and a graduate course), a time-horizon, and plans for research activity and subsequent research funding proposals.
The interdisciplinary clusters should align with the OVPR-identified areas of research priorities and areas of distinction at UNM.

The Provost office should draft letters of MOU for each faculty participating in the cluster to ensure that promotion and tenure policies value and recognize work in the cluster, as well as to ensure that workload expectations are clearly-defined.

A broad-based interdisciplinary committee of faculty should be asked to review and select proposals for interdisciplinary clusters.

- Existing interdisciplinary academic formations such as the Water Resource Program and the Interdisciplinary Film and Digital Media program should be re-examined and jump-started.

- Graduate Studies should be made a College so that it can more easily house interdisciplinary programs and clusters.

- An interdisciplinary committee of faculty should be appointed and chaired within Academic Affairs to evaluate and review interdisciplinary programs on a yearly basis. The interdisciplinary committee may eventually be a place to encourage or even supervise interdisciplinary hires. The committee could also play a part in P&T processes for interdisciplinary faculty.

- Academic Affairs should consider funding cluster hires in departments based on the interdisciplinary clusters it supports. The Provost-level interdisciplinary committee should participate in searches as advisory to departments.

- Commit to interdisciplinary research/teaching clusters that are focused on “grand challenges” that UNM researchers are especially well-positioned to solve. (see UCLA Grand Challenges in appendix)

- Imagine policies that privilege innovation over Student Credit Hour (SCH) production – in other words, encourage cross-disciplinary work even when it may lead to a reduction in department and college SCH production. Perhaps SCH should follow a faculty member’s home department regardless of where the SCH is produced.

**Why Commit to a Redesign in these ways?**

- Any redesign of the University should come from faculty seeking a University infrastructure that currently doesn’t exist. In other words, a successful redesign to departments and colleges must align leadership and grassroots faculty innovation – otherwise this redesign will be perceived as a mandated consolidation.

- Creating pathways for faculty to venture beyond their “home” department is likely to foster a broad, University-identity that may improve faculty morale as well as retain some of our most innovative, discipline-crossing faculty.
• Identifying interdisciplinary research clusters and marketing UNM as a place to study and research these “grand challenges” is likely to distinguish our core curriculum from regional competitors, as well as to attract students nationally and internationally interested in careers and research questions related to these challenges.

• Interdisciplinary research clusters and “grand challenges” are likely to change over time. Hence, we recommend a structure with some flexibility, that has a time horizon for serious evaluation and assessment.

• Departments and programs should be encouraged to consider shared, interdisciplinary hires and to propose innovative redesigns when, and if, they choose. In other words, Academic Affairs should signal to departments that it is open to innovative and entrepreneurial proposals to reimagine the boundaries of disciplines.

Appendix

