Collaborative Leadership: Background Statement

Interdisciplinary research and teaching are critical to producing workable solutions to many of society’s most pressing problems. The high level of institutional investment in seeding interdisciplinary initiatives during the past decade, and the multitude of interdisciplinary programs, centers, and projects that have emerged over an even longer period, are critical sources of institutional innovation and vitality. While the academy has been a fertile seedbed for these energetic initiatives, there is a growing sense that aspects of the existing institutional structure, policies, and practices, historically organized by discipline, create unnecessary impediments to success for faculty and students engaged in interdisciplinary teaching, research, and creative initiatives. The University’s Strategic Positioning process recognized the challenges inherent in working across traditional disciplinary boundaries, and identified the University’s ability to successfully engage in interdisciplinary teaching, research, education and creative expression as essential to attaining our goal of becoming a top three public research university.

One impediment to successful interdisciplinary inquiry is the gaps that often exist in the skills required to engage in and lead such work. To address this problem, The Graduate School, in partnership with the Office of Human Resources and the Provost’s Interdisciplinary Team, is designing a new professional development series for faculty, staff, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students engaged in interdisciplinary research, teaching, training, and creative endeavors. The series, which will be piloted in fall 2007 and run on a regular basis thereafter, will provide participants with opportunities to gain the collaborative leadership skills needed to successfully navigate the potential challenges in working in interdisciplinary teams, to launch and manage cross-disciplinary collaborations, and to advocate for the institutional changes needed to foster all forms of interdisciplinary inquiry at the University of Minnesota.

The series is being developed in recognition that many of the skills needed to effectively engage in collaborative and interdisciplinary activity are not routinely taught within the academic and professional curriculum. Working in teams often requires greater awareness of and ability to translate discipline-based concepts, methods and practices into terms comprehensible to experts from other fields. For example, the effective leadership of collaborative research teams often requires considerable attention to group dynamics, the professional development of team members, negotiating the division of labor and credit, as well as managing conflict, nurturing shared values and respecting diversity. Even the legal guidelines surrounding shared intellectual property are relevant to collaborations, but are not routinely taught in other sorts of leadership training programs, which are based on individual models of leadership and achievement. There is much to learn from those who have successfully secured external funding for interdisciplinary research and training initiatives in terms of how to organize and structure work that crosses departmental and collegiate boundaries, how to assemble and lead a diverse team, and how to maneuver through such bureaucratic processes as the return of indirect costs to participating units. Faculty who engage in team-teaching across disciplines or lead interdisciplinary academic
programs, and those who lead other interdisciplinary enterprises within the University, face similar challenges that demand the cultivation of special leadership skills.

While the leaders of collaborative teams are often chosen on the basis of their individual academic or professional credentials, promoting the development and accomplishments of a team comprised of co-equals engaged in interdisciplinary activity requires leadership skills beyond those needed in a hierarchically organized enterprise. Understanding these sorts of differences and building the skill set required for the collaborative leadership of interdisciplinary initiatives is at the heart of this professional development series. Interdisciplinary initiatives that have received central funding through the compact process have been asked to send key administrators, staff, faculty and students to this professional development series with the goal of enhancing the effectiveness of their teams. This series, however, will be open to all who are interested, and participants will help steer both the content and direction of the series. As this is intended to be a mutual learning environment, participants with excellent skills in a particular aspect of collaborative leadership will be invited to share them with others.

This PEL project will focus on developing a list of collaborative leadership competencies, learning outcomes, assessment strategies, training modules and resources related to collaborative leadership across traditional disciplinary boundaries. The work will involve information collection and analysis, as well as the development of a series of recommendations for a comprehensive and ongoing leadership development program that would include both training and assessment components. In addition to engaging the University of Minnesota community in this project, PEL team members will also have the opportunity to engage nine peer institutions who have joined with the University of Minnesota to form the Consortium on Fostering Interdisciplinary Inquiry (CFII) regarding what they view as essential skills in leading interdisciplinary initiatives, what challenges they face at their institutions related to this topic, and the best practices they have developed in response to the need for advanced training on this theme. CFII institutions include Brown, Duke, UC-Berkeley, U Illinois-Urbana Champaign, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, UNC-Chapel Hill, University of Washington, and UW-Wisconsin. A second set of universities, also identified as leaders in interdisciplinary inquiry, could also be tapped to provide additional insights.