

2012-2013 Seminar Participants

"Introducing the Interdisciplinary: Planning and Assessing Student Learning in Interdisciplinary Programs"

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This spring, I'm teaching AM420: Seminar in American Studies, the American Studies program's new capstone course. I've spent significant time this fall working with members of the American Studies steering committee to craft our thesis guidelines. Those guidelines not only outline our expectations for a capstone thesis, but also articulate an interdisciplinary thesis rubric that assesses four key elements in interdisciplinary work (attention to disciplinary sources, critical argumentation, multidisciplinary perspectives and interdisciplinary integration).

Such intensive consideration of what we want our majors to demonstrate when they leave our program prompted me to take a second look at how we might introduce such skills in AM200: Introduction to American Studies. I am applying to participate in the 2010-2011 Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar so that I might revisit the course design, content and learning goals of the Introduction to American Studies course in light of our capstone requirements. What skills do I want American Studies students to know at the end of AM200 given the nature our capstone course? What types of classroom assignments introduce the four "markers" of interdisciplinary work?

How does novice interdisciplinary thinking and learning distinguish itself from what we ask our more experienced students to do? In short, how do we assess interdisciplinary thinking and learning in introductory level courses? Ultimately, I would like address those questions through a three-stage process: first, an extensive literature review of interdisciplinary learning; second, a revised American Studies program assessment guide that would outline how "interdisciplinary habits of the mind" are introduced and assessed during various times in a major's four year experience; and third, the creation a comprehensive course portfolio for AM200 that details how interdisciplinary learning goals and outcomes are manifest in course content and assignments. It is my hope that the literature review, program guide and course portfolio would also serve as the initial step in a larger SOTL study of interdisciplinary curricula, including an initial model for assessing student learning as well as the research and rationale to support a more detailed study.

Such questions come at a critical time for Stonehill College, the American Studies program, and my career. The current strategic plan of the college advocates for a strengthening of interdisciplinary initiatives through the creation of a Center for Interdisciplinary Programs. The creation of a center to oversee interdisciplinary programs coincides with an increasing student interest in such programs. Over the past three years, the American Studies program has grown from fourteen to just under forty majors. In the fall of 2011, after three years of transitioning from the old program requirements to the new, all majors will be subject to the requirements of the revised program, which includes the introductory and capstone courses. This spring also marks the end of my three year contract as a faculty member in the

History Department and (I hope) the beginning of a full time appointment in an interdisciplinary program under the new Center for Interdisciplinary Programs. As a full-time faculty member in one of the Center's largest programs, my study of interdisciplinary learning positions me to take on a leadership role in facilitating discussions about curriculum design and learning outcomes for such programs.

I'm choosing to undertake this project because of the general need I see, both for my students and for the faculty, to develop a shared definition and model of interdisciplinary learning and teaching. Sustained conversations about what constitutes interdisciplinary learning and how such learning is to be accomplished would play an important role in helping our students define for themselves (and to graduate schools and others) what interdisciplinary thinking is, what it looks like and what its benefits are.

I would like to share my work with other Stonehill faculty members, particularly faculty associated with the college's interdisciplinary programs. I could do that in a variety of ways, including chairing a panel during academic development day, making a formal presentation to interdisciplinary program directors through the Center for Interdisciplinary Programs, or a teaching roundtable on interdisciplinary teaching. My hope is that undertaking such a project would also make me a stronger contributor to the current discussions involving interdisciplinary education here at Stonehill.