The College Commons
Call for Proposals
Academic Year 2011-2012

The College Commons Committee invites proposals for 2011-2012 that center on the topic “Brilliant Mistakes: The Uses of Failure, Wandering, and Experimentation.” The College Commons is designed to foster Uncommon Conversations across disciplinary boundaries. The “dream of the commons” is to bring together faculty, graduate and undergraduate students and community members, to discuss ideas, to challenge preconceptions, and to frame new questions—to broaden our intellectual horizons by putting into practice what it means to belong to a college of letters, arts, and sciences.

**The theme:** Ptolemy; Esperanto; frauds and forgeries: why is that nobody ever talks explicitly about how fruitful mistakes are, and how things that are disastrous can be so thought-provoking? Many of us in academic life, in fact, are fascinated by error, wandering, mistakes in general. We thrive on mistakes. Would scientific successes be possible without ideas that didn’t pan out? Can there be even a faintly interesting narrative that isn’t precipitated and kept moving by mistakes and misunderstandings? What would the *Divine Comedy* have been without Ptolemy? Spending a year on mistakes and mysteries, a year spent studying What We Don't Know, would remind all of us—students, faculty, and administrators—of the necessity of “coming up with a wrong answer, on the way to coming up with the right one.” Unfinished symphonies, disastrous novels, failed experiments; bad voyages, lost seamen, shipwrecks and tempests; science fiction novels, utopias and dystopias; counterfactuals (“What if the South had won the civil war?”): these are just examples of topics that can lead to fruitful discussions. Perhaps, too, thinking about failure will show us something about the nature of success.

We seek to facilitate broad discussions that will excite a diverse range of people to join in the conversation. For example, assessment of Ptolemy might bring together an astronomer, a Dante scholar, a historian of Ptolemy’s centuries of success (is it really a mistake to discover a truth that endures for more than a millennium?), and another expert on the repercussions of the Copernican revolution in both science and religion.

**The call for proposals.** We will give preference to proposals that (a) genuinely break the bounds of disciplines and (b) will start a continuing conversation. We are particularly keen to see proposals in which scientists and non-scientists expand each other’s horizons. We therefore ask that even though you may initially locate your questions within your own discipline, you ask them in such a way as to engage someone who approaches related questions from a very different perspective, using the tools of another discipline. As a result, your proposal should lift you out of the confines of any one discipline to re-situate your own ideas.

As we have done in the past, we are now inviting preliminary proposals, which the College Commons committee will read, exchange, and help expand further into truly inter-disciplinary conversations, as we help you expand your network of colleagues in diverse departments. We welcome ideas that are fully formulated, but we also encourage people to write to us in the preliminary stages of curiosity and in this spirit of collaboration.

We would also like to see “uncommon conversations” permeate the education that the College offers, so that students not only get a firm grounding within their chosen discipline, but also come to see how that can be enriched by reaching out across the disciplines. For this purpose, you may submit a proposal for a new course, an additional element to be introduced into an existing course (such as visitors or field trips), or a collaboration with faculty offering parallel courses in another department; you may also propose reading groups and other activities designed for graduate or undergraduate students, making clear what your proposal adds to a course or project you could offer within the existing structure of your home department.

Any college faculty member (working alone or in groups – but in any case with new ideas on how to work across disciplinary boundaries), including non-tenure track and clinical faculty, academic department, research center, or institute may submit a proposal. All we ask is that your proposal say not only why the proposed event will matter to those who already care about the questions it raises, but how it will spark the imagination of others within our community who might not even know that this question exists. The key is to create the conditions for conversations with people whom you would not normally encounter rather than with those with whom you already engage in discussions.

- Examples of possible activities include:
  - seminars, colloquia, visiting speakers, mini-conferences
• presentations and discussions of faculty work in progress linked to a shared theme or question
• field trips; events connected to laboratories, local museums and institutions; performances and exhibitions
• proposals for team-taught courses or linked courses taught in collaboration by faculty from two departments
• proposals for micro-seminars and sophomore seminars
• proposals to develop research modules within existing courses
• graduate seminars and research collaboration

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. The committee will be open to more unexpected forms of intellectual exchange, but special enthusiasm will be reserved for proposals that start a conversation rather than complete it.

**Deadlines and details.** Each proposal should address the following:

- A description of the proposed activity
- Who is proposing this activity? There can be one proposer or two or more co-proposers. If possible, a single proposer should identify people in other disciplines who would be interested, and perhaps collaborate, in the proposed activity.
- How will the proposal spark new exchanges? Whom will it interest and attract? How will it advance a larger exchange of ideas in the College?
- How will the proposing faculty build a conversation that truly cuts across diverse disciplines?
- Provide short (one paragraph) bios of the proposer and any co-proposers.
- What expenses do you anticipate?

We ask that faculty who intend to submit proposals send a preliminary description of their proposed program by **November 8** to Professor Greg Thalmann (Thalmann@usc.edu). Your initial proposal need be only 1-3 pages, with some words about your own relevant expertise and interests but focused on the above questions. The committee will then hold follow-up meetings and discussions with those whose proposals seem promising to help focus and further develop them, and, where appropriate, bring groups of like-minded faculty together in conversation. Final proposals are due by **February 15**; they should be no longer than 1,000 words, with a 100-word abstract, a budget, and a one-paragraph biography for each proposer. Submissions should be made via a single Word document or PDF file. Final decisions will be announced later in the spring semester.

We encourage you to begin speaking with your friends and colleagues. We also encourage you to discuss your ideas with members of the Steering Committee. We are eager to work with our colleagues to create programs that reflect our collective curiosity and sense of wonder, and look forward to hearing from you.

Steering Committee for College Commons:
Greg Thalmann, Chair (Classics and Comparative Literature)
Elinor Accampo (History)
Michael Arbib (Biology and Computer Science)
David Bottjer (Earth Sciences)
Werner Dappen (Physics and Astronomy)
Jo Ann Farver (Psychology)
Clifford Johnson (Physics and Astronomy)
Donal Manahan (Biological Sciences)
Craig Stanford (Anthropology and Biological Sciences)