Dornsife Faculty Council Curriculum Caucus  
2015-2016 AY Final Report

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Throughout Fall 2015, members of the Curriculum Caucus spoke with faculty from their home departments, members of the Dornsife Faculty Council, and members of Dornsife administration in order to determine a list of priorities on which to focus the Caucus’s activities in Spring. Through these conversations, the Caucus identified three priorities and subsequently formed subcommittees tasked with investigating each one. The subcommittees investigated the availability and efficacy of the following Dornsife offerings: experiential learning opportunities, undergraduate research opportunities, and interdisciplinary majors and minors. The final report of each subcommittee follows.

Undergraduate Research Subcommittee

Research is now more than ever a necessary part of the educational experience of a college undergraduate. Not only do more and more graduate programs expect applicants to have had such experiences, but also students themselves, as early as their freshman year, express the desire to be exposed to experiential learning that their classes cannot provide.

All Dornsife College departments should therefore seek to engage their students in Undergraduate Research. The College (or each department) should be able to provide training and assistance to enable the faculty to engage in such activities. Specific recommendations follow.

- The College needs to investigate new models for faculty-undergraduate research partnerships (hereafter called FURPs). The College could help encourage undergraduate research by working with departments to define a wide spectrum of possible Undergraduate Research Projects (hereafter called URPs). While some aspects of URPs may be common to all fields, others may be particular to specific disciplines, such as life and physical sciences, social sciences, or literature and languages. What’s more, the parameters and learning objectives of individual URPs can and should be tailored to the academic and career objectives of specific students. We should carefully consider and clearly articulate a set of desired outcomes for students who plan to continue on to graduate school and—even more importantly—those who will embark on a wide variety of careers outside the world of higher education after graduation. While publication is always a worthy goal, publication should not be expected from all students engaged in URPs and should not be the primary definition of an URP’s success. Faculty should also be willing to engage in a project that may not be directly related to their own current research project.
• Humanities-based scholarship is notoriously non-collaborative, with its emphasis on individually researched and authored papers; such disciplinary standards have likely limited the establishment of FURPs in the past. What’s more, faculty may have little experience explaining to undergraduates how participating in intensive research in literature, languages, history, or philosophy, for example, will prove useful if those students do not end up pursuing graduate degrees in the humanities. While collaborative research is not the norm in the humanities, it is relatively clear that an undergraduate student with an interest in higher education can gain valuable experience and insight into the profession by acting as a Research Assistant for a humanities faculty member. With some tweaking, this FURP model can also be used to benefit students who don’t plan to pursue a graduate degree in the humanities. In his paper “Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: Challenges and Prospects,” Mark S. Schantz (Hendrix College) suggests that, in serving as “research apprentices” on faculty projects, students with varied career goals gain widely-applicable skills, such as working with a team, “navigat[ing] a new world of alien sources,” and successfully “struggl[ing] with the task of making meaning.” The important thing, he suggests, is “requir[ing] students to reflect in writing on what they learned by participating in the research process, focusing more on skills earned and how they were changed by the research process, rather than focusing on publication.”

• To allow students more research opportunities and relieve the burden from T/TT faculty, RTPC faculty should be allowed and encouraged to participate in and lead URPs. A meaningful first step toward this aim would be changing the requirement that SURF and SOAR projects list a T/TT faculty member as advisor of record.

• The College should recognize that leading substantive, meaningful URPs takes significant time and effort. Incentives, such as additional professional development funds, consideration for promotions, stipends, and course relief, should be created to support widespread faculty involvement in URPs.

• The Dornsife webpage on undergraduate research should be updated in order to direct students toward resources designed to help them identify promising research projects, mentors, and funding. The website could include videos. Here is an example done by a USC student association called the Undergraduate Research Consortium: https://urcusc.wordpress.com/2016/03/01/new-interview-with-dr-assaf/

• Like many other institutions, Dornsife could create its own Center for Undergraduate Research. Many other universities boast such centers, which provide preparation for students interested in URPs. They can also provide training, information, and support to faculty interested in leading URP. Finally, such centers also help matching student and mentors. Many additional activities of a central undergraduate research office for Dornsife can be offered at low cost, funded collaboratively, or funded through external grants or gifts. In addition to one-on-one advising and coaching, a centralized undergraduate research office can offer group sessions—through workshops and

1 http://www.cur.org/assets/1/7/winter08schantz.pdf
seminars—that can reach students more efficiently. See, for example, the Rice Humanities Research Center [http://hrc.rice.edu](http://hrc.rice.edu) and the University of Washington Summer Institute in the Arts and Humanities: [https://www.washington.edu/undergradresearch/summer/siah/](https://www.washington.edu/undergradresearch/summer/siah/)

Undergraduate Research is an integral part of the education that a research university such as USC must provide. The Dornsife College must position itself to be able to offer quality URPs to an increasing number of its students if it is to retain them and entice more high school applicants to the College. This can only be done through collaborative efforts from its faculty and strong support from the College.

**Interdisciplinary Majors and Minors Subcommittee**

This Subcommittee was tasked with (1) considering the role of interdisciplinary majors and minors in attracting, retaining, and educating Dornsife students; (2) considering how strategies and procedures for creating interdisciplinary majors and minors might be improved; and (3) offering ideas for new interdisciplinary programs designed to respond to student needs that are not being met by traditional majors and minors within the College.

**Task One: The Role of Interdisciplinary Majors and Minors in Dornsife**

Members of this Subcommittee believe that interdisciplinary majors and minors have the potential to benefit both Dornsife students and Dornsife itself. Interdisciplinary programs have been shown to attract students to the College by offering them curriculum that:

- seems better tailored to contemporary student interests than traditional liberal arts and sciences majors and minors;
- bridges the gap between students’ intellectual interests (i.e., what they would like to study) and their professional goals (i.e., what they—or their families—feel they should study in order to obtain a good job); and
- is reflective of the modern world and workplace, in which multiple disciplinary perspectives and techniques are employed to understand and address pressing issues.

By carefully crafting interdisciplinary majors and minors to respond to genuine student interest and the realities of the changing workplace, Dornsife can both shore up its enrollment and ensure that its graduates are entering the professional world with a set of diverse disciplinary perspectives and skills.
According to its “Interdisciplinary Majors and Minors” website, Dornsife currently offers six interdisciplinary majors and twelve interdisciplinary minors. According to enrollment numbers provided by Dean Lamy, the most popular Dornsife-based interdisciplinary majors are, in descending order:

- International Relations/Global Business (303 majors)
- Philosophy Politics and Law (140 majors)
- Narrative Studies (128 majors)
- Health and Humanity (72 majors)

The most popular Dornsife-based interdisciplinary minors are:

- Mathematical Finance (89 minors)
- Forensics and Criminology (72 minors)

Based on enrollment data and conversations with Dean Richard Fliegel, who has spearheaded the creation of a number of interdisciplinary programs at USC, the Subcommittee has concluded that the most successful interdisciplinary majors and minors allow students to combine their interests in traditional academic disciplines (such as Philosophy, English, History, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, and Math) with “practical,” career-based knowledge and skills. Such programs send the message that students’ intellectual curiosity and cross-disciplinary interests are assets rather than liabilities. They also make transparent the connection between a course of study and a career path—that is, they highlight not just what students will learn, but how they can apply their new knowledge and skills in non-academic careers.

**Task Two: Strategies and Procedures**

In order to be successful, new interdisciplinary majors and minors must be created in response to genuine student need and developed to capitalize on the interests and strengths of current faculty. Thus, the Subcommittee believes that new interdisciplinary programs should arise organically from current Dornsife faculty, who—through their close contact with students, USC colleagues, and colleagues at other institutions—are most likely to notice gaps between evolving student interests and current curriculum, and be aware, also, of how other institutions are using innovative programs to close those gaps.

Despite the potential benefits interdisciplinary programs offer students and the College alike, the Subcommittee has found that USC currently provides faculty with little encouragement, guidance, or incentive to develop such programs. To help identify promising areas of curricular development, the Subcommittee suggests that the College communicate to all TT and RTPC

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2. [https://dornsife.usc.edu/interdisciplinary-majors-and-minors/](https://dornsife.usc.edu/interdisciplinary-majors-and-minors/) This website (and thus the program count above) does not include some Dornsife-inclusive interdisciplinary majors and minors, such as Philosophy Politics and Law, and International Relations and Global Business.

3. All major counts based on Fall 2015 enrollment data provided by Dean Lamy.

4. All minor counts based on Spring 2016 enrollment data provided by Dean Lamy. Note that enrollment data for the Consumer Behavior minor was not provided (perhaps because it is not housed in Dornsife?). Of the other interdisciplinary minors for which data was provided, none currently enrolls more than 10 students.
faculty the desirability of monitoring the success with which their department’s current curriculum meets student needs. To facilitate interdisciplinary partnerships, the Subcommittee also suggests that the College make it easier for faculty to identify colleagues across the University who are tackling similar problems or engaging similar questions through different disciplinary lenses.

To encourage more faculty engagement with the curriculum-development process, the College should disseminate clear guidelines for proposing new classes, majors, and minors. In conjunction with this, the College could compile and distribute a set of best practices for developing new curriculum to faculty and department chairs. Best practices might include:

- reviewing current enrollment data to determine common characteristics of departments’ most popular (non-required) courses;
- surveying students on unmet needs and interests;
- surveying other faculty on curriculum gaps in their departments or missing bridges between departments;
- developing courses and course materials that clearly articulate the connection between curriculum and professional skills;
- developing and offering single classes—perhaps as Freshmen Seminars, Problems without Passports (PWP), or Maymesters—to gauge student interest in new courses designed to augment current majors/minors or build new majors/minors.

The Subcommittee also suggests that the College consider encouraging faculty participation in the curriculum-development process through incentives, which might be modeled on USC’s Research and Creative Projects Grants.

**Task Three: Potential New Interdisciplinary Programs**

Because the Subcommittee believes that new interdisciplinary programs should be suggested by faculty based on genuine student and faculty interest, and because members of the Subcommittee have not yet been able to engage in the best practices suggested above, we have not made it our goal to suggest a wide variety of potential new programs in this document. That said, members of the committee have identified two areas of student interest and faculty expertise that could potentially yield new interdisciplinary minors.

The first is a minor in Social Justice and Activism, which, as the Subcommittee understands it, may already be in development. While the Price school offers a Social Justice specialization at the graduate level and Dornsife has a small new minor in International Health, Development, and Social Justice, a Social Justice and Activism minor could respond to wider student interest noted by faculty across the College and utilize faculty expertise in a wide variety of departments including English, Gender Studies, American Studies, the Writing Program, and Sociology.

A second suggestion offered by the Subcommittee is a minor in Rhetoric and Speech Writing, which could attract students from Marketing, Communications, Political Science, English, and a
variety of other Dornsife majors, and utilize the expertise of faculty from Political Science, Writing, Philosophy, English, History, Art History (visual rhetoric), and Foreign Languages (global communication), among others.

Experiential Learning Subcommittee

In recent years, USC has stressed the importance of engaging with “wicked problems” that cross disciplinary and geographical boundaries. The University has also acknowledged the immense impact that hands-on research and experiential learning can have on the intellectual development of its students, and has made the development of such learning experiences a priority. These two institutional foci come together in innovative curricula like Problems without Passports (PWP) and Maymesters, which not only offer students extraordinary learning experiences but also have the potential to act as powerful recruiting tools for both Dornsife and USC. This Subcommittee was formed to study strengths and weaknesses of the current PWP and Maymester proposal and implementation systems and consider ways to expand the reach of these programs, which still remains relatively limited.

In order to discern what makes for a successful PWP or Maymester course, the Subcommittee began by identifying faculty who had taught multiple experiential learning courses and asking them to complete a brief survey on their experiences. In the survey, faculty were asked to reflect on their experiences planning, proposing, securing funding for, obtaining student interest in, and teaching such classes, in the hopes that a set of “best practices” might be uncovered. We received seven responses, six of which were related to PWP and one of which was related to a Maymester course. Disciplines represented included East Asian Studies, Spatial Sciences, Anthropology, French, and International Relations. All courses counted for major or minor credit. What follows is a summary of the most significant survey results:

- Recruiting students for these courses is a major challenge. In order to ensure sufficient enrollment, individual faculty members must invest significant amounts of time and energy in marketing their courses to students. Marketing efforts include posting to social media, participating in study abroad fairs, emailing students across various departments, holding information sessions in relevant departments, and posting to the PWP website. Word of mouth was cited as key to recruitment by multiple professors, but securing good word of mouth is obviously a challenge for a new course. The Subcommittee urges the College to consider ways to help faculty with the recruitment process.

- Faculty report that it is difficult to get interested students and the College itself to commit to proposed courses, which results in many last-minute cancellations of PWP offerings. Students are often reluctant to commit to experiential learning courses by the registration deadline because they are waiting for SURF funding results, which are not announced until the end of the semester. One faculty member reported that a class with six enrolled students (who had turned down internships and other opportunities to enroll in the PWP) got cancelled at the last minute by the College. Other faculty lamented that the new tax
levied by the University on PWPs has raised the cost of these programs so as to make many courses—even formerly successful ones—unfeasible. The Subcommittee urges the College to consider how deadlines for funding announcements (such as SURF awards) might be moved in order to make participating in experiential learning courses feasible for students. The College should also consider ways to make the application and funding process more transparent. Faculty report that getting PWPs approved requires access to information that can be hard to find and subject to change. First timers, especially, may be daunted by a seemingly opaque and at-times arbitrary approval process.

- Faculty report that PWPs have the most success when they can serve/attract students from a variety of majors. Other faculty report challenges recruiting students when their PWP is designated to only grant credit to students from one particular major. So as much as possible, PWPs should be crafted by faculty to appeal to multiple groups of students and, from an administration standpoint, should have arbitrary credit designations lifted.

- The Subcommittee suggests the College put together informational panels of current and former PWP/Maymester faculty to introduce new faculty to best practices related to planning, proposing, marketing, and running these courses.