

Survey Report  
Associated Colleges of the South  
**Interdisciplinary Initiative**  
May 30, 2008

**Introduction**

During the academic years 2006-2007, the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), a consortium of sixteen distinguished liberal arts colleges and universities located in the South, issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) designed to enhance/promote the discussion of interdisciplinary work and support for interdisciplinary programs on its member campuses. While the consortium recognized that certain interdisciplinary programs already existed, it also believed that faculty needed new opportunities to look at issues from multiple perspectives in order to prepare students to be "global citizens."

Nine campuses were awarded funding with several campuses being awarded two or three grants each. All nine campuses participated in the survey questionnaire and twelve responses are summarized in this document.\* The survey questionnaire consisted of twenty-five response items, designed to measure the degree of campus impact and the potential need for continued programmatic funding support.

**Survey Responses**

The first seven questions of the survey pertained to informational items relating to the institution and the persons completing the survey form. One (1) response was completed by a director. Eleven (11) were submitted by persons holding faculty rank and actively engaged in instruction.\* The disciplines represented were English, biology, sociology/anthropology, theatre arts, philosophy, environmental studies, mathematics, English, and teacher preparation.

\*Centenary College of Louisiana, Centre College, Furman University, Hendrix College, Millsaps College (2), Rollins College, Sewanee: The University of the South, Trinity University, Morehouse College (2)

**Question #8:** This question asked if any of the institutions offered opportunities for interdisciplinary study prior to the grant. It also asked how resistance to such an idea was overcome.

Only one institution, the Center for Teacher Preparation at Morehouse College, indicated that they did not offer any opportunities for interdisciplinary study. This was largely due to faculty workload and lack of incentives to pursue additional course offerings.

Among the institutions that offered interdisciplinary studies, the responses were not very different. While some grantees mentioned that programs on their campus lacked structure, most listed lack of motivation and/or incentives as being the reasons why overtaxed faculty did not consider participating in existing programs.

**Question #9:** Desired Grant Outcomes

While the goal of almost all of the grantees was to develop an interdisciplinary study program, the focus of the programs themselves differed greatly. Programs ranged from a study abroad program in Albania, a course on quantitative data analysis, an interdisciplinary analysis of the African-American male, and a critical thinking course for freshman. Only two institutions deviated from planning a course. Hendrix College opted to create an exhibit entitled *Women of San Luis: Oral History and Photography in Rural Costa Rica*, which will tour ACS schools and other venues throughout the United States. Trinity University chose to produce a book and lab manual for an interdisciplinary mathematics course

**Question #10:** This question asked if grantees successfully achieved their outcomes.

Most of the respondents achieved their goals to varying degrees. For many, the course development process has been completed, but the course has not actually been offered yet.

Others, such as Millsaps College, completed their course development, but were disappointed in the results. According to student standardized test scores, course participants did not improve their critical thinking skills. However, faculty felt that the students did increase their understanding of scientific methodology.

Centenary College was also disappointed in the end result of their coursework. While the respondents did meet their goals, they met them for a smaller number of students and staff than they had planned.

Most notable were the outcomes achieved by Rollins College. Participants in the *Ecological Restoration: Cultivating the Civilized Landscape in the Liberal Arts* project produced a website and field guide and hosted a conference. They were also able to integrate the project in a series of courses across several disciplines.

**Question #11:** Describe the opportunities and challenges that have come to light as a result of the Interdisciplinary Initiative on your campus?

**Opportunities:**

1. The opportunity for students to gain a new perspective by working for a client group
2. Gained the support of college administration after several college trustees accompanied participants to Albania
3. The interdisciplinary approach was enlightening and invigorating.
4. Opportunities to engage with methodologies with which we were unfamiliar and uncomfortable.
5. Getting students to think about group goals instead of personal goals

**Challenges:**

1. Problems with advertising events on campus
2. Difficulties recruiting students for a course on scientific methodology
3. Coordination of faculty schedules
4. Time and teaching loads

**Question # 12:** How did this project further the work of each discipline involved?

1. The grant forced us together which resulted in much progress
2. It created the beginning of a collaboration that will continue on other projects
3. Demonstrated that humanities and sciences can team teach very useful courses
4. Established relationships among faculty and students who share interest in quantitative data analysis
5. Teaching disease and its impact on culture simultaneously will engage students better than teaching two subjects separately

**Question #13:** How did the faculty and students benefit from this project?

**Faculty:**

1. This experience has helped faculty relate to students better.
2. Faculty learned from each other's disciplines.
3. The faculty was granted the wherewithal to create new college programs of study
4. Faculty benefited professionally
5. Increased mathematical skills of faculty and their understanding of mathematical approaches in biology
6. Both faculty and students gained new insights into our own understanding of our Discipline specific knowledge in light of learning more about the other

**Students:**

1. Students interacted with other students from different disciplines and heard questions and analyses they normally would not have
2. The students had the opportunity to contribute to the design and implementation of The project, gaining valuable experience
3. Students got experience with a group project that crossed disciplinary boundaries, practiced a variety of skills

**Question # 14:** Are you involved in any new interdisciplinary projects as a result of your work with the project?

Of the twelve respondents, three are involved in new projects, Rollins, Hendrix and Centenary. In addition, participants from Millsaps college are working to improve the scientific methodology course which they developed through the current grant. They plan to teach the course again after modifications have been made. Trinity University indicated that they are considering submitting a NSF grant to further their efforts and provide support to students.

**Question #15:** If you could redesign your project, what would you do differently? Why?

Of the twelve respondents, four would not make any changes to their project. One did not respond. The others answered as follows:

- 1 Have money for teaching release
- 2 Figure out a different way of assessing critical thinking and training faculty
- 3 Develop a more structured plan of recruitment and retention of students
- 4 Select students carefully and have more pre-project prep time with them
- 5 Included a student driven taping and review of our conference
- 6 Involve a social scientist the next time we teach the course
- 7 Incorporate quantitative analysis used in epidemiology
- 8 Hire more staff support to handle the administrative duties
- 9 Pay more attention to providing resources that would increase the probability of expedient and effective implementation of newly designed courses

**Question #16:** This question asked participants if their grant was a catalyst for other initiatives or changes on campus. It also asked what still needs to happen to encourage more interdisciplinary projects.

The ACS Interdisciplinary Grant influenced changes on several of its member campuses. The most notable of the responses came from Millsaps College. While they have had interdisciplinary programs on campus before, none have spanned all three divisions of the college. The scope of this endeavor may encourage others to think more broadly about interdisciplinary programs.

Both Morehouse College and Sewanee: The University of the South recognized the grant as having been a catalyst for more faculty to duplicate such a project. They felt that their colleagues were inspired by the projects and gained a better understanding of how it worked.

Unfortunately, everyone did not share a favorable opinion of the grant projects' effects. The four respondents who indicated that there had been no changes on campus since the projects noted more students and faculty needed to see the benefits of interdisciplinary endeavors. In addition, the respondent from Furman University mentioned the difficulty in calculating teaching credits for interdisciplinary programs as being a barrier to more such projects.

**Question #17-18:** These questions are regarding the promotion of the ACS grant projects on campus, to ACS institutions, and to the public at large.

Seven projects have not yet disseminated information on their work. Listed below is how the other five have publicized their work:

- Sewanee: The University of the South presented to a group of educators at the U.S. Institute for Theatre Technology National Conference in 2007.
- Trinity University has shared information about their project on campus. They are also scheduled to present at a math conference in January 2009.
- Rollins College designed a website about their work. They were also honored by 1000 Friends of Florida.
- Morehouse College presented at the CETL Conference in January 2008. They also shared information on their project at a divisional meeting.
- Millsaps College promoted their project through campus recruitment. Additionally, they made presentations to college alumni and the Board of Trustees. Their project was highlighted in the last issue of Millsaps Magazine.

**Question #19:** Planned follow-up activities after the grant period

Three respondents have not yet piloted their programs. Of those who have, one had no plans for follow-up activities and one did not respond. The rest of the responses fell into two categories:

*Continuing the work already begun:* The majority of the grantees expressed the need to build upon their current efforts by acquiring additional funding and/or streamlining the current project.

*Exploring Next Opportunities:* Several institutions expressed in pursuing new opportunities such as creating a publication, developing new workshops, exploring new collaborations, and developing a new studies program.

**Question #20:** Would a course that was developed through this grant be offered again?

Of the institutions that have already offered their courses, five will offer them again in the future.

**Question #21:** How was the project evaluated? What did the evaluation reveal?

Four of the grantees who have already piloted their programs responded that they had evaluated them. The result of one was a peer-reviewed article. Two institutions used student reviews of the course as an evaluation tool. The fourth institution, Millsaps College, used their students' standardized test scores as their method of evaluation. They reported that the tests revealed that there was no improvement in students' critical thinking skills following the course.

**Question #22-23:** These questions asked respondents if their course would be offered again and when.

The majority of courses that were already offered will be offered again in 2009.

**Question #24-25:** Describe any subsequent funding that you have received. What resources would you need to continue?

While most of the institutions still need funding to continue their efforts, a few of them will continue to offer their courses without further assistance. Several grantees have already received funding. Most notably, the *Florida Studies Initiative Grant* at Rollins College was awarded a grant from the Elizabeth Morse Genius Foundation and the *Interdisciplinary Program in Albania* received support from some of the Millsaps College trustees.

In addition to needing funds, several institutions stated that faculty needed release time and clerical assistance in order to continue their work.

## **SUMMARY**

The ACS Interdisciplinary Initiative proved crucial to growth in this area of programming. Even though most of the grant-funded institutions already had some type of interdisciplinary programming on their campuses, grantees were able to build upon or improve what previously existed. Not only did the majority of them meet their goals, but there were unexpected results as well. Perhaps the most important outcome outside of anticipated accomplishments is the fact that these projects became "models of excellence" for faculty who had been reluctant about embarking on such an endeavor. As a result of the work of their colleagues, other faculty were able to see what could be accomplished and how interdisciplinary programming could look different from the traditional model. Students also benefited from exposure to more in depth work in their fields.

Despite the accomplishments of the grant initiatives, the programs were not without its challenges. Faculty noted lack of release time and need for administrative assistance as two of the main obstacles to completing their work. Some also had problems recruiting students as advertising on campus was a

challenge.

Overall, the objectives of this program funding seemed to have been met. In addition, several grantees have opted to pursue new interdisciplinary projects after their experience with the ACS initiative.