

Interdisciplinary Graduate Research Concentrations
Guidelines and Regulations
Interdisciplinary Committee
College of Graduate Studies and Research
November 2004

As the Interdisciplinary Program grows, a number of students are entering the program in research areas that are focused around a general topic area and a group of faculty that interact quite closely. The purpose of an interdisciplinary graduate research concentration is to allow students to undertake graduate studies and research with an interdisciplinary cohort of faculty who share a common research interest and with whom they can interact. The concentration areas are also designed to make the application procedure easier for students wishing to do interdisciplinary work with pre-existing groups.

An interdisciplinary graduate research concentration is not a graduate program. Students that are part of a concentration area are enrolled as graduate students in the Interdisciplinary program, and receive a Masters or PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies.

Procedure for Creating a Concentration Area

A group of faculty makes application to the Interdisciplinary Committee of the College of Graduate Studies to become a concentration area. Application takes the form of a Letter of Intent that is submitted to the Interdisciplinary Committee. An important part of the Letter of Intent is a pro forma application form that students will complete when applying to the interdisciplinary program through a concentration area.

The Interdisciplinary Committee, according to the criteria outlined below, reviews the Letter of Intent. If the Letter of Intent is accepted, the concentration area comes into existence and potential students in the concentration are allowed to apply to the interdisciplinary program using the procedures outlined in the Letter of Intent.

The Interdisciplinary Committee will inform the Executive Committee of the College of Graduate Studies of each concentration area that is approved.

Criteria for Concentration Area

The Interdisciplinary Committee, in evaluating Letters of Intent from potential concentration areas, will use the following criteria:

(1) Concentration areas must be interdisciplinary. Many definitions of interdisciplinarity exist, all of which offer insights into what is meant by the term. The following perspective from Fairbairn and Fulton (B. Fairbairn and M. Fulton. 2000. *Interdisciplinarity and the Transformation of the University*. Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada. Available at <http://coop-studies.usask.ca/pdf-files/interdisciplinarity.pdf>) provides one way of thinking about this topic: “interdisciplinarity can be defined as a problem-based approach – or what we might also call an object-based approach – in which knowledge and methods are brought to bear as needed to solve a complex problem or to address an object of study. The problem or the object is defined externally to the disciplines involved; it is not a simple intellectual construct or abstraction. Such an approach is distinct from disciplinary research, in which problems are conceived within the knowledge and methods of the discipline” (p. 4). This view stresses the need for identifying problems, for the crossing of boundaries, and for embracing different perspectives and methodologies. There are, of course, other definitions as well as different intensities of interdisciplinarity. Lisa Lattuca, in her book, *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching among College and University Faculty* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2001) provides a good discussion of different terms and uses of terms, e.g. cross-disciplinary vs. multidisciplinary vs. interdisciplinary vs. transdisciplinary. Interdisciplinary research is towards the higher, more integrated end of this spectrum – i.e. not just surveying the separate views of a few disciplines but actually striving to meld their analyses together or even go beyond what the separate disciplines do.

In the Letter of Intent, potential concentration areas need to outline why an interdisciplinary approach is required to address the issues of interest in the concentration area.

(2) Concentration areas are based on groupings of faculty that have worked together in some reasonably formal capacity and for some period of time. Evidence of this involvement must be provided in the Letter of Intent by the potential concentration area. For instance, concentration areas may often be developed around a research centre or institute, although less formal groups may also develop. What is important is that the faculty groupings have some history of working together on research problems and issues that require multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Thus, for instance, faculty that have recently come together to form a group for the sole purpose of providing graduate student training may not be approved as a concentration area. A key part of the Letter of Intent is the “Faculty” section; the Letter of Intent must show that there exists on campus a sufficiently large enough group to support a concentration. While no set number of faculty is specified, it is difficult to think of a concentration without at least 6-10 faculty.

(3) Another key aspect of the Letter of Intent is the “Concentration Area Course Statement” section. A potential theme area must be able to show that a sufficient number of courses exist on campus to offer to students working in the concentration. Interdisciplinary students often include Special Topics courses (898s) in their programs, and while the students’ programs should not be comprised entirely of 898s, evidence must be provided that faculty in the concentration area are willing to offer 898s as is reasonably required.

Administration of Existing Concentration Areas

Once a concentration area has been accepted, it can operate as a concentration area until it is either disbanded or it moves to become a full-fledged interdisciplinary graduate program. Both of these options are examined in more detail below.

Once a concentration is officially designated as such, it will be able to function as an identifiable research and graduate training group. Faculty in concentration areas are able, and indeed are encouraged, to market their set of courses and research activities as a package, and to develop a clear identity as a location for research and graduate work.

Students in a concentration are formally in the Interdisciplinary Program in the College of Graduate Studies and Research (CGSR), and as such are administratively part of the Interdisciplinary Program. Students wishing to be admitted to a concentration have to make official application through the Interdisciplinary Committee. To streamline the application process, a pro forma application form is approved along with the letter of intent. Students interested in a concentration work with the faculty in that area to prepare an application. The area leader then submits the application on behalf of the student to the Interdisciplinary Committee. If the student meets the requirements for the Interdisciplinary Program and the concentration, the Interdisciplinary Committee will recommend the student for admission to CGSR. In making its decision, the Interdisciplinary Committee relies heavily on the recommendation of the area leader.

Once a student is admitted to a concentration, her/his program is governed by a Program of Studies, which must be approved by the student's Student Advisory Committee (SAC). As is the case throughout CGSR, the SAC reports to CGSR through the SAC and the Interdisciplinary Program chairs.

Students in concentrations have access to the same support and services (e.g., scholarships) that are available to all students in the Interdisciplinary Program.

Existing concentration areas are reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that they continue to play the role for which they were created. To aid in this process, concentration areas are required to submit a short report annually on their activities (the InterD committee will send out an annual note requesting this report). If, based on these reports as well as other indicators (e.g., student time in progress), problems with a concentration are identified, the Interdisciplinary Committee will work with the concentration to address the issues.

To ensure that concentration areas remain dynamic and up-to-date, the Letter of Intent will be reviewed and, if needed, updated every two years. The Interdisciplinary

Committee will report to the CGSR Executive Committee on the activities (e.g., successes, challenges) of each concentration within three years of the concentration being established.

While concentration areas are encouraged to market their set of courses and research activities as a package, it is important that concentration areas not advertise themselves as graduate programs (recall that students that apply through concentration areas are enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Studies program).

Maintenance of Concentration Areas

Concentration areas will be discontinued, after consultation with the leaders of the concentration area to ensure that the concentration is no longer active, if no students are admitted for a three-year period.

The Interdisciplinary Committee can also discontinue concentration areas if significant problems in their operations are identified.

Transforming Concentration Areas to Full-Fledged Programs

It is recognized that concentration areas will be formed for different purposes. To accommodate these different purposes, it is important that the Interdisciplinary Committee work with the concentration areas to ensure that the needs of the concentration and the students in the concentration are being appropriately met.

For instance, in some cases, concentration areas will be created by a group of faculty that have a strong interest in a problem or issue that requires an interdisciplinary approach, but that do not see themselves as creating and running a full-fledged graduate program. In such cases, a concentration area may decide to remain as such for a long period of time, even while remaining active (e.g., bringing in two or three graduate students a year). In other cases, a concentration area may be created by a group of faculty as a first step in the development of a full-fledged graduate program that would be interdisciplinary in nature (in this case, a program application for the new program will have to be taken through the

normal procedures and is subject to a final decision by Council). To accommodate these different cases, and others that may arise, a flexible approach to the ongoing work of concentration areas needs to be taken. This approach should be one that recognizes the interests of the faculty involved in the concentration areas and that ensures healthy and vibrant graduate student training in the interdisciplinary area.