Action Team 2: Development of Campus Wide Crosscutting Research Themes

Final Report Submitted to the Vice President For Research University of Oklahoma

by
May Yuan
Heather Basara

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BACKGROUND

During the Spring of 2010, University of Oklahoma (OU) faculty were openly invited by the Vice President for Research (VPR) to engage in the process of determining whether the OU was in a position to add campus wide crosscutting research themes (CCTs) to the portfolio of scholarly activities in the next decade. Currently, faculty engage in discipline specific projects, collaborative efforts between related disciplines, and broader interdisciplinary research. The CCTs were proposed as a means to transform the culture of research engagement and competitiveness at OU in a new and broader capacity. The motivation is that participating scholars will leverage disciplinary expertise to collaboratively study complex and compelling scientific and societal questions.

For this purpose, crosscutting scholarship was defined as research that engages faculty from disciplines of every college on campus. The CCT concept represents a new type of research model, designed to expand the research enterprise, that seeks to incorporate the basic, natural, and social sciences with engineering and technology, humanities, and fine arts; CCTs were not intended to replace existing successful research programs. (Details of Action Team #2’s tasks are appended).

Because the goal was to determine a course of action for OU research regarding crosscutting campus wide research themes, the process was designed to be open and inclusive of faculty from every department and college at OU. To pursue broad inclusion the following was conducted:

- The VPR met with leadership from all colleges on campus to encourage engagement,
- Faculty participation was solicited by open invitation of the VPR,
- Meetings were specifically scheduled for varying days of the week and times of day in order to prevent routine exclusion by standing commitments, and
- Detailed meeting information, including notes were posted on the Aspire2020 website (https://aspire2020.ou.edu/action-teams/action-team-2) and discussions were conducted on a campus mailing list.

In an enthusiastic response to this invitation, faculty from 10 schools/departments and four colleges met from late April through mid-June; the meeting period was even expanded to facilitate presentations of the sixteen CCT proposals submitted in this short period. Despite the end of semester and early summer schedule challenges, approximately 35 faculty members attended each of the meetings (all spanned a duration of one to two hours), and included a core group of approximately 20 members that attended most meetings. Further, discussions continued asynchronously on the Aspire2020 website as well as a campus mailing list organized to facilitate extended discussions. Still, participation from engineering and physical science departments was disproportionately large in comparison to faculty from social sciences, arts, and humanities. Many faculty members expressed desire to participate in the process, yet, due to end of semester and summer commitments, were unavailable.
SUMMARY OF MEETING OUTCOMES

All scheduled meetings included volunteered presentations of research themes: none of the presentations were pre-selected. A total of 16 research topics were presented and each included an interdisciplinary design that has potential to grow into a campus wide research theme. NOTE: some participants who presented research ideas did not regularly participate in the general process.

Broadly speaking, Action Team 2 had a two-fold mission: (1) to discuss the value of CCT’s, their selection and implementation in the abstract, and (2) to produce a synthesis leading to specific, concrete themes. At the beginning of the Action Team process, the team leaders anticipated that the discussion would unfold naturally, and in directions considered most important by the participating faculty members. Overall, the meetings were dominated by research theme presentations but also included discussions concerning the current research culture and the process by which themes could emerge, be selected, and managed. The meeting notes indicate the details of both benefits and cautions to regarding the pursuit of research themes at OU. The meeting notes are available on the Aspire2020 website and also attached as an appendix.

The Action Team #2’s Leaders originally planned that the Action Team would focus on synthesizing themes using either the presented topics as a starting point or through expansion of the most compelling presented topics (as decided by the team participants). However, while a component of the faculty felt they could identify potentially productive and transformative themes, others chose to limit the discussions focused on the development of themes due to concerns that determining theme(s) would be neither fair nor representative of the broader faculty, especially members of the arts and humanities. Concerns also emerged regarding the required investment as well as the source(s) for the needed resources. A list of specific comments regarding the benefits and cautions associated with theme selection, in addition to faculty recommendations, are attached in the appendices.

ACTION TEAM’S DECISION

The faculty present on June 18 voted to (a) suspend further discussions concerning CCT themes and (b) not recommend any particular theme(s) to the VPR for reasons related to process and concerns of topical selection. For many faculty this decision was based on disagreement over the process of selection and not the actual proposition of pursuing the CCT concept. In conjunction with the June 18 decision, all 16 presentations are advanced to the VPR for review. Given the time of year, the duration of planning activities (less than 8 weeks time), and the fact that many presentations had multiple coauthors, the action of 16 voluntary ideas indicates a high level of interest in developing the CCT concept.

While the Action Team chose not to formally advance any themes, several team members supported the notion of synthesizing and advancing themes, both via voting in the June 18 meeting and through emails. Potentially viable and transformative themes emerged
during the process and provide the opportunity to move forward with campus wide crosscutting themes.

Regardless of the Team’s outcome, the level of interest and commitment during the process demonstrated enthusiasm for the Aspire2020 objectives, including the possibility of adding a new approach to the OU research enterprise. Participation in Action Team 2 was not a trivial endeavor and, as such, regular involvement reflected serious commitment by the faculty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations regarding Campus Wide Crosscutting Research Themes are made to the Vice President for Research:

1. Several viable themes emerged during the Action Team 2 meetings and the potential to make themes successful resides with the individual investigator’s enthusiasm for such scholarship. Several authors of themes have already begun to pursue crosscutting work regardless of formal support. Therefore, it is recommended that the VPR identify such groups and assist in establishing the most compelling themes.

2. There is sufficient interest in development of the CCT concept to establish an ongoing and permanent component of the research enterprise that expressly pursues new research themes and manages the progress of existing research themes. Such an entity could be a permanent and ongoing mechanism to engage faculty across campus and encourage scholarly growth. It is critical to success that these endeavors include a fair, well-defined and periodic process for the development and selection of ideas. Further, it should be accountable to engage faculty campus wide. Finally, this entity may formally seek applications for research themes, manage pilot projects, and generally serve the faculty as a prospector for new research ideas.

3. An informal research community should be established to encourage exchange of ideas and networking among researchers. This began during the Aspire meetings and continuation of this networking will facilitate needed culture change.

INCLUDED DOCUMENTATION

1. Aspire2020 Terms of Reference
2. Table of Proposed Themes
3. Summary Slides from Research Presentations
4. Meeting Notes
5. Faculty Thoughts Concerning CCT
6. Faculty Comments on Theme Benefits/Cautions