USC's Profes Breach Boundaries to Spur Interdisciplinary Research

Their work, funded by annual faculty fellowships, have led to innovative projects and unexpected collaborations.

by Gia Scafidi <scafidi@usc.edu>

ENCOURAGING A “non-traditional” approach to academic research, an emerging program at USC emphasizes the power of collaboration.

Through the university’s Center for Interdisciplinary Research, professors are combining expertise on projects that cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries. The approach adds punch to their efforts to address intricate puzzles of interest to the public.

“Our nation’s biggest problems – whether they’re biomedical, environmental or societal – must be looked at from all perspectives: the top, the side, the bottom and the back,” said Cornelius Sullivan, USC’s vice provost of research. “We’re really matching an approach to the complex nature of the problems.”

ESTABLISHED IN 2002 by Provost Lloyd Armstrong Jr., CIR aims to facilitate the growth of an interdisciplinary culture at USC and to stimulate innovative projects through annual fellowships.

Each academic year, six tenured and tenure-track faculty members are selected to receive up to $50,000 in research funding.

During their “internal sabbaticals,” CIR fellows work full-time initiating or advancing creative interdisciplinary projects. Professors are released from any teaching or service obligations, though they must meet continuing responsibilities to their graduate

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New Ed.D. Program Is Tailored for Professionals
USC Rossier School of Education degree builds peer support.

by Elaine Lapriore <lapriore@usc.edu>

SAN MARINO school psychologist Veronica Escoffery always planned to get a doctorate in education, both for personal satisfaction and professional advancement.

“Like my job immensely, but I’ve felt limited in my ability to make an impact at the research and policy levels of education,” Escoffery said. “A doctorate in education will help me make a greater contribution to education in general, and specifically the students, parents and staff I work with on a daily basis.”

Escoffery looked at programs all over Southern California: education leadership degrees at UCLA and San Diego State and doctoral programs at UC Santa Barbara and UC Riverside.

School of Education’s newly redesigned Ed.D. program, which welcomed its first class this fall.

SIMILAR TO an executive MBA, the new three-year Ed.D. program is tailored for education professionals in the workforce. Classes are held at night and on weekends, in Sacramento and Orange County as well as the University Park campus.

“When we did an independent

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students and may continue working on currently funded research.

Over the course of the year, each fellow produces a product, such as a project proposal for federal or foundation funding or a book.

“It’s an amazing thing that the provost is doing by encouraging this kind of research,” said Thomas Lyon, a law professor with a background in developmental psychology who is one of the 2003-2004 CIR fellows. “With this fellowship, I’ll be able to do things that I would never have the time to do otherwise.”

INTEGRATING colleagues from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, USC’s School of Social Work and USC College’s department of psychology, Lyon, an expert on the use of child witnesses, plans to write a book about the intersection of law and developmental psychology. He will also develop an internship program to teach law students how to conduct effective interviews with children suspected of being abused.

As with other CIR fellows, Lyon’s project began as a proposal submitted to a review panel of University Professors and other distinguished faculty who have made significant contributions to the university in multiple disciplines.

As part of her fellowship, Mataric created USC’s Center for Robotics and Embedded Systems with collaborators from various disciplines.

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Goran, a professor of preventive medicine, physiology and biophysics at the Keck School of Medicine at USC, led a CIR project that focused on the origins of obesity and its relationship to increased risk of diabetes in Latino boys.

His fellowship, which incorporates community members, physicians, exercise scientists and psychologists, led to a recent two-year, $365,000 grant from the Thrasher Research Fund to support a new exercise program for young boys in East Los Angeles.

For some professors, however, team collaborations just don’t do it.

FORMER CIR FELLOWS Vanessa Schwartz and Timur Kuran, for example, incorporate “interdisciplinary” into their work but maintain a “one-man band” approach.

“Although I am an historian, I use the methods and materials that people in other disciplines traditionally use,” said Schwartz, an associate professor of history in USC College.

Schwartz’s fellowship project—a book examining the relationship of film to ideas of “nationness” in France and America in the 1950s—stems from the intersection of history, art history, film studies and French studies.

Kurant, a professor of economics and law, has set out to identify the social mechanisms that caused the Islamic Middle East, once considered economically advanced, to turn into an underdeveloped region. His work draws on law, economics, history, sociology, political science and cultural studies.

“I’ve always considered the established disciplines of the social sciences unduly confining when it comes to addressing big issues,” said Kurant, who holds the King Faisal Chair in Islamic Thought and Culture at USC.

“Anyone who is serious about studying a major social issue must be prepared to ignore the prevailing boundaries among established academic disciplines.”

But interdisciplinary research faces major challenges in the academic world, Sullivan said.

“Some of the very youngest faculty find interdisciplinary research fascinating, but think it puts them at risk of not getting tenure, not getting promoted and not getting published with certain journals because they’re breaking with tradition,” said Sullivan. “It’s a tough road.”

THE TASK of distributing due credit also presents challenges, Sullivan added.

“If you’re the only one who works on a project, it’s pretty clear where the credit goes,” he said.

“But if you’re one of three members of a team who produces a great piece of research, it’s difficult to determine where the intellectual horsepower came from and who did the work.”

Like any practice that disrupts tradition, interdisciplinary research is likely to face criticism for years to come.

But from the sound of its supporters, the approach is here to stay.

“Many funding agencies,” said Sullivan, “are beginning to put their money where their mouths are, saying this is the kind of research approach that we need to solve the problems of our nation.”

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