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Making Interdisciplinarity Possible

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As interest in interdisciplinary research increases on college and university campuses, interdisciplinary faculty positions housed in more than one department, college, or program are likewise increasing (*Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research*, The National Academies Press, 2004, p.17). While this may be seen as a heartening development, encouraging scholars to work across boundaries and develop new intellectual connections, it also creates challenges for faculty in these positions, for administrators required to oversee them, and for both internal and external peers expected to evaluate their performance.

To encourage interdisciplinarity and limit the conflict that can ensue, we recommend the establishment of a written Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between all relevant parties.

Simple “courtesy” appointments, allowing a faculty member to offer a course or advise graduate students in other departments, remain popular. In addition, more complex “joint” appointments, where a faculty member’s salary and responsibilities are split across multiple units, are on the rise.

Such arrangements are on the rise. For example, at Michigan State University, our institution, 35 percent of faculty have, at one time or another over the last decade, held a joint appointment. And in the 2000s about 70 percent of jointly appointed faculty spent all of their time at MSU in joint appointments, while in the 1980s less than half of joint appointees did so.

Despite their intellectual appeal, these arrangements can cause difficulties if they are not well-defined from the start. For example, in genuinely interdisciplinary joint appointments, the faculty member is appointed across programs that often have varied professional expectations and evaluation metrics. In other cases, a faculty member whose work lies within a single discipline may be jointly appointed in two (or more) units that each undertake teaching and scholarship in that discipline but perhaps from different perspectives. In either situation, jointly appointed faculty may feel ensnared by distinct, and sometimes contradictory, expectations; administrators may worry about how the joint appointee will contribute to the core mission of the unit; and evaluators may lack a clear understanding of the standards to which the faculty member should be held.

The creation of a written Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) can provide the clarity needed to avoid those problems. An MOU governing a joint appointment expresses the common understanding of the faculty member and unit administrators regarding every facet of the faculty member’s position. Each of the authors of this article has directly benefited from being an MOU signatory: one (EHS) as a college dean, the other (MPN) as a jointly appointed and interdisciplinary faculty member. [Here's a link](#) ^[1] to several sample MOUs from our university.

A well-crafted MOU should specify the resources each unit will provide to the faculty member, the faculty member’s responsibilities within each unit, and the standards by which the faculty member’s performance will be evaluated. Resources might include items such as salary, office space, start-up funds, teaching or research assistantships, or conference travel support. A list of responsibilities might cover average teaching loads, specific courses or course sequences, curriculum development, advising duties, supervision of graduate students, committee work, and general expectations for levels of scholarly productivity.

The evaluation information should provide links to the evaluation metrics of each unit and might also include text describing how the differing standards of the two units will be bridged and which forms of academic productivity will be

included during evaluations. The MOU should accompany the faculty member's packet whenever they are evaluated, whether that evaluation is internal or external to their home institution.

Why take the trouble to create a special document governing joint appointments? We argue that MOUs can play several distinct and helpful roles for administrators, faculty members, and evaluators:

An MOU summarizes all of the key information relative to a joint appointment in one place. While details of the appointment may exist in the letter of offer, the appointment forms, the human resources website, e-mails exchanged between the parties, etc., the MOU brings everything together in one neat package for easy reference.

An MOU establishes who is bound by the agreement. In an MOU, all relevant departments, colleges, or offices are represented among the signatories. As such, the fiduciary responsibilities of each party are made explicit. An MOU also addresses potential shortcomings associated with leaving the offer letter as the only record of certain information, since typically only 1-2 people sign an offer letter (e.g., the department chairs) and they may not represent all units involved with all aspects of the joint appointment (e.g., the colleges or a special campus program).

An MOU makes the expectations and responsibilities of all parties clear. Clarity of performance metrics and the faculty evaluation process can be a major source of anxiety for all parties involved in a joint interdisciplinary appointment. With an MOU in hand, a faculty member can feel secure about moving forward with their teaching, research, and engagement responsibilities; each unit will know how much participation in their daily business to expect from the joint appointee; and evaluators will understand the standards of evaluation for the faculty member (which will likely be different than what they are used to).

An MOU can clarify the promotion and tenure expectations to which a faculty member will be held. Different entities within the same university often have different norms and formal expectations for reappointment, tenure, and promotion. An MOU can make clear exactly which set(s) of expectations a faculty member is held to and how evaluation is conducted in the unit(s) to which those expectations belong.

An MOU provides a stable frame of reference for viewing a joint appointment. While a typical single-unit appointment is readily understood by comparison to many similar appointments within that unit's culture, any joint appointment spans cultures and may even be unique. In addition, the multiple administrators overseeing each joint appointment will inevitably turn over. The MOU records the nature of the appointment and the commitment each office or unit has made to the faculty member to guide subsequent administrators.

An MOU provides a comparative framework for viewing all joint appointments. While much of the language of an MOU will be standard (e.g., any MOU will cover appointment fractions, teaching loads, scholarship expectations), variations in language make it easier to ascertain which aspects of a given joint appointment need to be (or have been) tailored to the particular individual. An MOU also "normalizes" the joint appointment in the eyes of the candidate and the administrators. That is, if an MOU template exists, then a joint appointment might not be viewed as an unusual or difficult kind of appointment to arrange.

An MOU minimizes the potentially nebulous (i.e., scary) parts of a joint appointment for all parties. Even if an MOU does not nail down every detail of a joint appointment, it can address many of the more factual pieces and keep the aspects that are subject to interpretation within bounds more similar to those of a single-unit appointment. This clarification may make a candidate for a joint appointment more willing to take the interdisciplinary position in the first place, because they are more confident they will be treated fairly. It may also make an administrator who has not previously dealt with joint appointments more willing to give a joint appointment a try with a new hire.

It is also worth noting that an MOU can be changed, by mutual agreement, as circumstances warrant. Interdisciplinary faculty should be encouraged to modify their position as their career changes over time. Hence, we recommend that the faculty member think of their MOU as living documents, something for them to revisit and revise at obvious points of career transition (e.g., reappointment, tenure, and promotion). Because all signatories must agree to the changes specified in an MOU, one party to the joint appointment cannot impose arbitrary changes.

Joint appointments are an effective way to support the interdisciplinary work that is increasingly important to the academy and society – but it takes special care to structure them in ways that are fair, transparent, and support the faculty member's productivity. MOUs can be a mechanism to accommodate and nurture this important academic development. Ideally, the culture of the academy should value and evaluate interdisciplinary work and joint appointments on their own terms. Until that becomes the norm, however, creating an MOU for interdisciplinary, jointly

appointed academics will be a critical intermediary.

Author/s:

Elizabeth H. Simmons and Michael P. Nelson

Author Bio:

Elizabeth H. Simmons is dean of the Lyman Briggs College and a professor in the department of physics and astronomy at Michigan State University. Michael P. Nelson holds a joint appointment as an associate professor of environmental ethics and philosophy in the Lyman Briggs College, and in the departments of fisheries and wildlife and of philosophy at Michigan State.

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[1] <http://www.lymanbriggs.msu.edu/faculty/MUFJA.cfm>

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