Recommendation of the UBC regarding sustainable funding for undergraduate interdisciplinary programs.

The UBC was charged by the Provost to make recommendations on how to provide financial incentives for undergraduate interdisciplinary programs. The Committee began by defining “interdisciplinary” as meaning multi-college, so the programs contained within one college were not discussed. Using this definition, there are two undergraduate interdisciplinary programs, Natural Resources and Environmental Studies. Both programs involve more than 200 students from several colleges.

To guide the Committee’s discussions, one program, Natural Resources, was singled out for an extensive analysis (by Terri Cook). The director of the Natural Resources program, Paul Doescher, met with the Committee to answer questions and offer suggestions.

The Natural Resources program is a healthy, well-run program involving students taking courses on-campus at OSU, on-campus at the Cascades campus, and via Ecampus. The revenues and costs of the program are about 1.4 million dollars per year with a slightly positive value of the income-cost metric. The administrative costs of a 0.5 FTE director, support staff, and related expenses are about $164,000 per year, with the cost being paid by Forestry (73%), and Ag Sciences (27%).

The UBC recommends that 25% of the administrative costs of undergraduate interdisciplinary programs (defined as the salary of the director, support staff and related benefit expenses) be paid by a “central” source, the Provost’s discretionary funds. We believe that the participating colleges must continue to pay the administrative costs, to keep administrative costs down, but that in view of the overall benefits of these programs to the University some portion of their costs should be met centrally.

The UBC examined whether the small excess revenue of the program could be “taxed” to provide this central funding but decided that the uncertainties in a cost/revenue analysis are too great to make that a viable policy.

In implementing this recommendation it is the intent of the UBC that the college sponsors of a particular interdisciplinary program, (Ag Sciences, and Forestry in the case of Natural Resources and COS in the case of Environmental Sciences) have their administrative costs reduced by 25% with those costs being covered by the central source.

We note that this policy is similar to that used to fund graduate interdisciplinary programs through the Graduate School.