

Creating a Governance Model to Foster and Sustain Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs

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Introduction

Eastern Illinois University strives to meet the expectations for best practices outlined by the Council of Graduate Schools by working to create a culture of excellence in graduate education and ensuring that governance structures foster and sustain that excellence. Following multiple efforts to create Eastern's first professional science master's degrees, the Graduate School determined that Eastern's existing governance structures were insufficient to support interdisciplinary degree opportunities. To address that issue, the Graduate School launched a new governance board, the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies Board. This new governance model was essential to creating a pathway for individual departments to collaborate and develop interdisciplinary graduate degrees.

Historic Governance and Approval Processes

Historically, the University managed its new degree approval processes using a traditional model requiring that an academic department create and approve a new degree program followed by approvals of the college curriculum committee and the Council on Graduate Studies. In 2009, a group of faculty members began the process of developing a new interdisciplinary professional science master's degree, the Master of Science in Geographic Information Sciences. This program required courses from seven participating departments: geology/geography, biological sciences, mathematics, economics, political science, technology, and business administration. Because the governance structures favored creation of degrees within individual departmental disciplines, these programs had no standard processes for resolving typical and atypical issues that always emerge with the development of a new degree. The challenges included finding a process for gaining individual department, chair and dean support to participate in the degree, creating a process for engaging faculty to convene and advance discussions regarding the curriculum, and implementing an overall structure to approve the final curriculum. The lack of a governance structure prolonged the development of the degree and created frustration for the program leaders. As an initial step toward seeking a long term solution, a Professional Science Master's Board was developed and launched in 2011. The new PSM Board immediately provided some of the structure required for the resolution of problems and a nurturing environment to foster rigor and excellence. There were several key features of the original PSM Board that significantly assisted the new program coordinators. These included access to the deans and chairs of the participating departments who provide access to and commitment to the resources essential to the health of the program. Another key factor included regularly scheduled meetings to foster engagement and exchange of information with participating departments and colleges.

Launching a New Governance Model: The Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies Board

After analyzing the value of the PSM Board, the Graduate School proposed to the Provost that an Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies Board be created. The mission of the IGS Board was to develop a scaffold of support structures that would nurture existing interdisciplinary graduate programs and provide guidance and incentives for the development of new interdisciplinary programs. The Graduate School's IGS Board was launched in 2012 and included representatives from two existing interdisciplinary programs: the MS in Geographic Information Sciences and the MA in Gerontology. The Board also included representatives from five emerging interdisciplinary programs: the MS in Sustainable Energy, the MS in Health Promotion and Leadership, the MA in Arts Administration, the MS in Cybersecurity, and the MS in Biochemistry/Biotechnology.

During its earliest meetings the IGS Board outlined its purposes as follows:

- **Mission:** The mission of the Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs Board is to receive updates from the program leaders on approved and developing interdisciplinary graduate programs, to identify and resolve issues, and to provide guidance to developing programs.
- **Approvals:** All interdisciplinary graduate programs will develop an advisory board composed of a representative from each of the participating programs. The faculty members serving on the board are responsible for developing curriculum, courses, student assessments and related curricular matters. The approvals will move from individual department approval of courses, to approval of the degree program and requirements by the Interdisciplinary Advisory Board. Once the departments and Board have approved the curriculum, the approvals advance to the academic college that serves as the “home” of the program, to the Council on Graduate Studies, and finally on to the State Board of Education for final approval.
- **Board Members:** The IGS Board includes at least one representative from each current or progressing interdisciplinary program who would typically serve as the graduate coordinator, the department chair from the department that provides an academic home for the program, the college deans, and the Dean of the Graduate School who will convene the meetings, set the agendas, and implement the policies. Each new interdisciplinary program that wishes to advance will begin by adding a program coordinator and a department chair to the IGS Board.

Key factors that have helped interdisciplinary study grow with the new Governance Board Model:

- **Academic Home:** Every interdisciplinary program must first establish an “academic home” that includes an existing department that agrees to serve as the caretaker and supporter for the degree program. The academic home ensures that standard requirements for all degree programs are managed by the program coordinator and host department chair. Every program also has an academic college home so that it receives the support of resources and needs.

- Degree Advisory Board: Each interdisciplinary program has a Degree Advisory Board that typically is composed of a representative from each of the disciplines participating. These Boards establish their own missions, bylaws, and agendas; however, they make their agendas, minutes, and related decision making documents available to the IGS Board so there is a continuous flow of information from the degree program back to the chairs and deans. The degree advisory boards meet according to the needs of their degree programs.
- Fiscal Agents on IGS Board: Department chairs of the departments that host interdisciplinary programs and the college deans of these departments serve on the IGS Board and are available to resolve standard fiscal concerns. These include replacing faculty who may be unavailable due to sabbaticals or resignations, securing resources for recruitment, organizing processes such as accreditation or securing the PSM designation, and ensuring operational needs such as supplies and travel, essential to sustain the program. The IGS Board hosts meetings for all participants twice each year; the second Thursday of September and February. These meetings always include a review of resource needs and updates on programs and approvals.

The positive outcomes of this approach have been to achieve approval and launch the MS in Sustainable Energy and MS in Health Promotions/Leadership in less than one year. We also made more rapid progress with the decision to delay further discussion of the MA in Arts Administration until the participating programs were able to provide the support needed to advance the degree. We also have two additional degrees under consideration; the MS in Cybersecurity and MS in Biochemistry/Biotechnology. While not all problems have been resolved, the Governance Board Model has worked well for Eastern.