UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

ICJMT EXTERNAL REVIEW

Andre Grothe + Jeffrey N. Cox, Office for Faculty Affairs | ICJMT External Review | March 18, 2013
Office for Faculty Affairs

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ICJMT External Review Committee:

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In response to the Provost’s charge, the visiting committee has focused its report around the following questions:

01 | What is the best way for the University of Colorado Boulder to serve its educational and scholarly missions in this large domain?
02 | What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current proposal?
03 | What advice would you have about implementing such important changes?

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01 | How can the University of Colorado Boulder best serve its educational and scholarly missions in this large domain?

At a time when the world of higher education is experiencing radical transformations, universities should accordingly reexamine their visions, strategies, and structure. The University of Colorado Boulder has embarked on a process of assessing the future structure of a group of disciplines that can be counted among the most dynamic ones today, in the academic world as well as in the rest of our societies.

In the past few years, various committees and task forces have been working towards developing a proposal for a new intellectual project that is accompanied by a re-defined administrative structure in the form a new College. The most recent iteration of these proposals is termed ICJMT (Information, Communication, Journalism, Media, and Technology) and it calls for a new College of Media, Design, and the Arts.

The exceptional potential of this proposal resides in the new synergies that will develop out of this new structure, based on the existing strengths in those units. Counting with these synergies, the new College and the University of Colorado Boulder will be able to exert a renewed leadership in these fields, based on the many interdisciplinary connections that will be supported and promoted by such a structure.

After the February visit and a careful reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the ICJMT report as summarized in this document, this committee recommends a two-stage implementation of the proposal. The first phase would contemplate the creation of a new College that would include the fields of Information, Media Studies, Journalism, Design and Communication. The goal here is to create an intellectually coherent new entity with a defined focus rather than one that broadly sweeps together a lot of disciplines that are in some way associated with new media art, emerging technologies, and 21st century communications.

The second phase would encompass the integration of some or all the arts (Art and Art History, Film Studies, Theatre and Dance, Music) into either the new college or into a second new college. At this point, this decision regarding the second phase would require some additional conversations and engagement of the faculty and administrators in these areas, as it is more fully explained below.
Strengths of the Proposal

The ICJMT proposal is bold and inventive and has the benefit of proposing a relatively simple structure for a new college. With the exception of the emphasis on “design thinking” (addressed below), it builds on areas of existing strength (see report pp 9-11 for specific areas identified and described), and offers a unique and creative mix of units. In identifying current assets at the university, it identifies some areas where those assets are not being used to their full potential and strvies to realize that potential.

Without a doubt, the ICJMT proposal has generated great excitement, the frank exchange of ideas, and the articulation of people’s hopes and fears about how CU Boulder will develop in this moment of rapid change. The committee thinks this has been very useful.

The ICJMT proposal has clearly given voice to some ideas that are coming from younger and / or more recently hired faculty members, and these voices seem generally not to be well heard in the current structures. Often, these voices have a clear understanding of some of the changes that are occurring outside the academy (and also in other academic contexts outside Boulder).

The current report identifies the potential for growth of Information Studies in ways that go beyond the current profile of Computer Science (see report, pp 11-12). It points in interesting and coherent ways to the resonances among communication, journalism, media and technology, and links together areas that could be weak on their own but that could – together – create pathways for new student growth and funding opportunities (see report, pp. 15-20 for descriptions of proposed new areas).

The committee found the TAM curriculum to be a real strength, a view shared by the people with whom we spoke. Some people expressed a desire for something like TAM at the faculty research level. The strength of TAM lies in its student numbers, the level of interest it generates due to its focus on technology, art, and media, and the existence of a transferable core curriculum that more easily accommodates a double major. The development of such a core curriculum in the new college should be a priority as the double major is one way to encourage an outward-rather than inward-facing culture among the colleges.

The report continuously encourages the breaking down of silos and increased porosity across the university. It seeks to find ways to enable more space and flexibility for “ground up” intellectual inquiry through teaching and research (see report, p. 21 for a discussion of porous relationships).

Weaknesses of the Proposal

Some of the weaknesses of the current proposal stem from the process that led to its formation, a process that, although consultative in many ways, ultimately by-passed
departmental structures, in part because the inclusion of several departments and programs in the plan only occurred toward the end of the consultation process. (Some departments and programs had chosen not to attend public discussions of the proposal because at an earlier point the discussions did not involve them.) Given that the report now concerns the possible relocation of whole departments and programs, the committee sees further consultation with deans, chairs, and departments and programs, as well as good communication about the consultative process, as a vital component of any successful plan going forward. (People generally seemed very happy with the consultative process followed for the ICT report, and so that earlier process might provide a roadmap for how to move forward from here. People also seemed very excited by the conversations that took place through the Center for the Humanities and Arts over the summer.)

At this point, the committee found the most recent report to lack intellectual coherence, bringing together too many different disciplines without having fully worked out their relation to each other. Some aspects of the proposal become very coherent once some of the suggested participants are removed, and the two-step process the committee recommends involves identifying the most coherent aspects of the proposal and implementing some version of the new college with the most coherent and willing group of participants immediately, while simultaneously exploring how those elements that seem less easily integrated into the proposed new college, such as Music, Film Studies and Art and Art History, might become part of this or a separate but equally ambitious institutional initiative. While the committee could see that many aspects of Film Studies and certain aspects of New Media Art could have a natural home in the new college through their exciting ties to many aspects of the new college—including Media Studies, Journalism, information design, creative problem solving through advertising, and so on—the proposal accounts neither for the humanistic / historically-driven research and teaching missions of at least some of the Film and Art / Art History faculty nor the place of traditional media (which overlap in very many ways with New Media Art) in the vision of the new college. These issues need to be worked out through future discussions.

Although technology and technological innovation clearly play an important role in the mission of the proposed college, the committee found the current proposal too driven by technology, rather than by a coherent intellectual vision, and we recommend taking technology out of the title of the new college for this reason, as well as rebalancing its role in the overall plan (see report, p. 2, Executive Summary).

“Design thinking” plays a key structural role in the plan for the new college, and yet many of our conversations over the course of the review highlighted the fact that there are very few design faculty members currently at Boulder. Although we think that the new college would undoubtedly benefit from growth in this area—indeed, we believe hiring in this area to be essential for some version of the plan to work—it does not seem optimal to begin the building of a new college around an area that is generally perceived to be lacking. Boulder’s existing strengths should be at the center of the initial implementation plan.

The ICJMT proposal avoids engaging the potential of the ATLAS center with the same degree of boldness that it engages other areas of the campus, yet ATLAS seems an
obvious resource for the new initiative. The committee noted the unique and important geographical location and resources of ATLAS. The physical proximity of ATLAS to the museum, the Film Studies program, and the Art and Art History department creates an enviable set of possibilities for collaboration and cross-fertilization that should be more thoroughly explored. ATLAS could serve as a unique interface between the proposed new college and the College of Arts and Sciences as well as certain aspects of the College of Music, perhaps in the form of an Institute, but this needs further thought and discussion. The committee recommends that ATLAS be thoroughly reconfigured in relation to the new vision. The use of ATLAS to improve porousness and collaboration between colleges should be a priority, as should increased access to its resources. It is the perception of the committee that the mission of ATLAS should be rethought. The committee is concerned both by the shared sense that the resources of ATLAS are not available to many, and by the perceived lack of standing faculty involved in the PhD program run through ATLAS. It is clear that the recent restructuring that makes ATLAS answerable to the College of Engineering is by no means ideal for a closer integration between ATLAS and a new college. The Art Museum is another great resource, also well situated, and the committee encourages the administration to search for a new director with interesting ideas for how the museum could contribute to both Phase I and Phase II of the implementation plan.

Many of the bold ideas in the report are very exciting. However, perhaps because of time pressure, not enough attention was paid to the question of how to integrate particular faculty members who are most excited about the current proposal, especially in the case of faculty members who are currently part of departments or colleges where there is some resistance to participating in the proposed new college. As our two-step plan suggests, the committee recommends neither implementing the current proposal against the wishes of named colleges, departments or programs (it is unlikely that a new vision will succeed without strong faculty support) nor allowing to remain unchanged those entities that have resisted, or fit incoherently into, the proposal in its current form. Rather, we suggest that the implementation of stage one (outlined above) include a plan for the active involvement of interested faculty from departments, programs and colleges that will not, at least initially, be part of the new college. There are many creative faculty members at CU Boulder who need better vehicles for their innovative energy than currently exist, and not all of them are housed in departments that fit best in the proposed new college. Yet their involvement could occur, for example, through dual appointments. The current proposal lacks this kind of flexible solution, but the committee thinks that such solutions are necessary at this point.

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03 | Recommendations for Implementation

Deans and chairs need to have a voice in the inception and implementation of a plan of this scale. Although they might have been regarded as a group that would have inhibited substantial change, input and consensus is critical, and this should be a priority going forward.
Design Studies should be developed as an area within the new college. Design crosses many of the disciplinary areas that are current strengths at Boulder, and design faculty and curriculum have the most potential to link these areas, as the report suggests (p. 13).

The current proposal should be applauded for its strength of vision in relation to the faculty and campus. The committee did not perceive it to be dismissive in tone, and found it to be in the spirit of the Provost’s charge to that committee to produce an exciting and innovative proposal. Although there have clearly been some missteps in terms of the consultative process, particularly in relation to the by-passing of implicated chairs, departments, programs and schools, the committee does not perceive the process to have been a “top-down” initiative, as clearly there has been a great deal of conversation at the faculty level through three different proposals. Although it has clearly been a difficult and demanding conversation, it is clear that a lot of productive discussion has taken place. The implementation process should continue to facilitate this kind of open discussion of ideas across departments and schools.

While implementing the plan for a new college, the committee also recommends actively engaging those departments and programs named in the proposal that will not be included in the new college (at least in its first stage). These entities need to be given space to grow and develop—we did not meet anyone fighting for the status quo, and there is a hunger for meaningful growth and development of existing entities. Such development could be fostered at this stage through various resource-related incentives, such as funding for innovative research, co-teaching, and other projects.

Careful attention needs to be given to the field of Film Studies in relation to the planned changes. The people in Film Studies hold varying views, a variety that reflects the hybrid nature of the field itself, but clearly some areas of the Film Studies curriculum are closely tied to Media Studies (see report, pp 9-10). It makes sense to think about at least this aspect of the curriculum, and perhaps other aspects too, in relation to the proposed new college. This is an important growth area, and it is an area where CU Boulder already has very strong national and international visibility, so the role of Film Studies in relation to Media Studies in the new college deserves further conversation with those involved in these fields.

A strong argument can be made for Film Studies to be included in a newly configured college, especially in light of the field of film studies clearly aligning with Media Studies (as represented by the professional organization, Society for Cinema Studies, changing its name several years ago to Society of Cinema and Media Studies). While the Film Studies department reports that they were not fully consulted in this process and some faculty oppose a wholesale move of the department, we suggest greater consultation with the Film Studies faculty, perhaps with the outcome that they eventually join the new college, providing the place of “history and humanities approaches” within the new college can be satisfactorily accommodated.

Cross-appointments may be one way to deal with the optimum location for faculty working in hybrid fields, such as art and design, humanities and the arts, etc. Such
appointments always need to articulate carefully the responsibilities of a given faculty member to the multiple homes involved to avoid unreasonable institutional expectations. As increased opportunities for innovative inter- and multi-disciplinary research and teaching paths are fostered, attention needs to be given to articulating best practices for the promotion and tenure of faculty who cross many lines and / or who are hired across schools and departments. We noted some difference between the perception of senior administrators, who felt that this was not an issue, and that of faculty members who felt that this was an issue of great concern. Since cross-department and cross-school appointments are currently rare at CU Boulder, any future move toward more such appointments must be accompanied by clear procedures for evaluation, promotion, and retention of such faculty.

The committee applauds the desire for increased porousness across schools, which is articulated in the report. The implementation of the new college and the steps that follow in the wake of that first phase, should continue to increase that porousness across colleges in addition to whatever innovative opportunities appear within the realm of the new college.

The ICJMT report, while suggesting Music might become a part of the new college, recognizes that it may remain a separate unit. It also indicates that should it remains separate it should ".... engage in a deeply collaborative relationship with the new college...." (see report, p. 4). Music’s desire to remain separate is understandable considering that the largest and highest ranked professional music schools across the country are all separate units. If, in fact, music remains an autonomous college, the committee concurs with the report’s admonition for meaningful collaboration with the new college, and would extend it to a School of the Arts should one be formed. Such efforts to increase porousness and multi-directional collaboration beyond the walls of the college would provide enrichment to the College of Music and to the other unit(s).

As new college structures are developed, it is important that the core curricula of individual colleges resonate with each other enough that students can easily double-major in different colleges.

The committee noted the lack of diversity among program, department, college, and central administration leadership. CU Boulder is clearly at a moment in its history where there is a great desire for change, and diversifying the academic leadership to include more female and under-represented minority faculty voices would model a commitment to change and create a transformative atmosphere at a variety of levels.