

New department expands mission of College of Arts and Sciences

In 2001, IBM coined the phrase "T-skills" referring to employees who have a strong core of expertise but also a wider range of abilities that allow them to collaborate in diverse teams. As employers look to hire graduates with a broader skill set, a new department in the College of Arts at Sciences at New Mexico State University is supporting more than 300 students to get a degree that embraces multiple areas of study.

"It's all very unique. I think this is the trend of the future," said Jim Maupin, head of the newly created department. "Part of the objective is to prepare students for 21st century challenges by encouraging and facilitating opportunities for creativity, innovation and integrated learning."

The Department of Interdisciplinary Studies is home to the women's studies program as well as students pursuing a Bachelor of Applied Studies or Bachelor of Individualized Studies degree. It allows NMSU students to pull together college courses from a variety of different departments into a degree plan that fits both their needs and their interests.

"This program offers today's students a broader, more flexible educational experience," said Christa Slaton, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. "The wide range of courses included through interdisciplinary studies can help to stimulate the kind of critical thinking skills that will serve these students well as they go through a lifetime of multiple career changes."

Maupin noted that the new department represents a growing movement across universities in every tier; among them are George Mason University, Farleigh Dickinson University, Miami University and the University of Washington.

The department will not only allow interdisciplinary studies students to have an identifiable home with resources, opportunities and support from all other

academic departments within the college, Maupin explained, but will also facilitate the retention and timely graduation of BIS/BAS majors.

"A well-designed interdisciplinary curriculum emphasizes the value of approaching complex issues from multiple perspectives, equipping students with the critical analytical skills to become effective problem solvers in their chosen careers," Maupin said.

Students work with advisers to map out a course plan that best serves their individual career goals within the requirements mandated by the state. However, they are not limited to majors within the College of Arts and Sciences. They may combine interests in multiple areas to create a degree plan that integrates courses from different departments and different colleges.

"These majors allow highly motivated and self-directed students to pursue structured inquiry of their intellectual curiosities and/or career interests not accessible through traditional academic programs offered at NMSU," Maupin said, adding that the department is going to be looking at what students with these types of degrees do after graduation.

Maupin explained these students are often adults returning to their studies at the university. Some have already earned an associate's degree from a community college. Maupin described them as individuals who can solve complex problems, are self-motivated and will pursue goals to the end.

"Their success depends on how well they package their skills and research what's needed in the career paths they choose," he added. "This person has a high level of maturity and is not thwarted by problems that don't have instant answers. This is the kind of person I want in my organization."

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