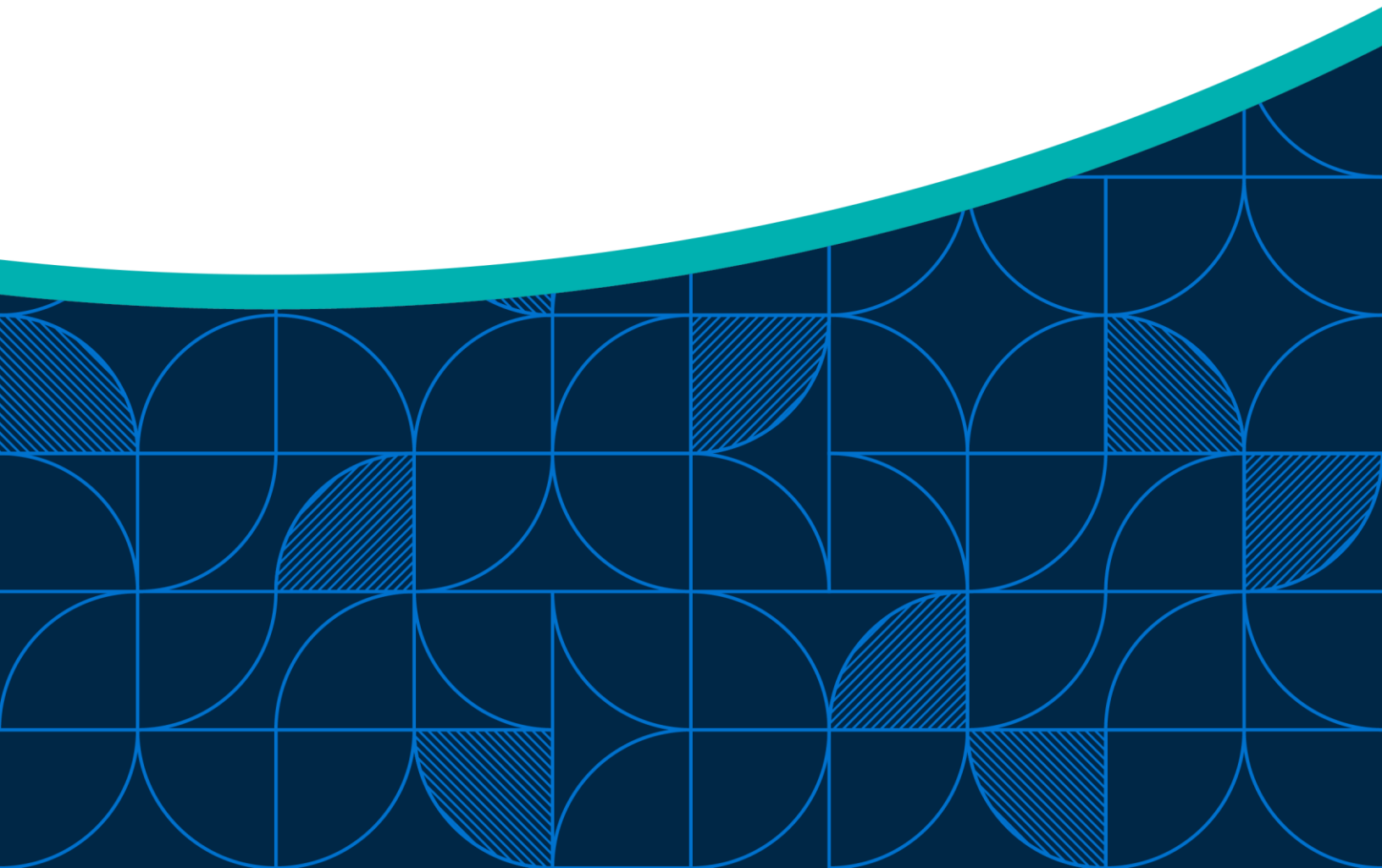
EAB

TOOLKIT

# Interdisciplinary Program Starter Kit

How to Design Successful Undergraduate Programs That Meet Demand, Overcome Siloes, and Drive Impact



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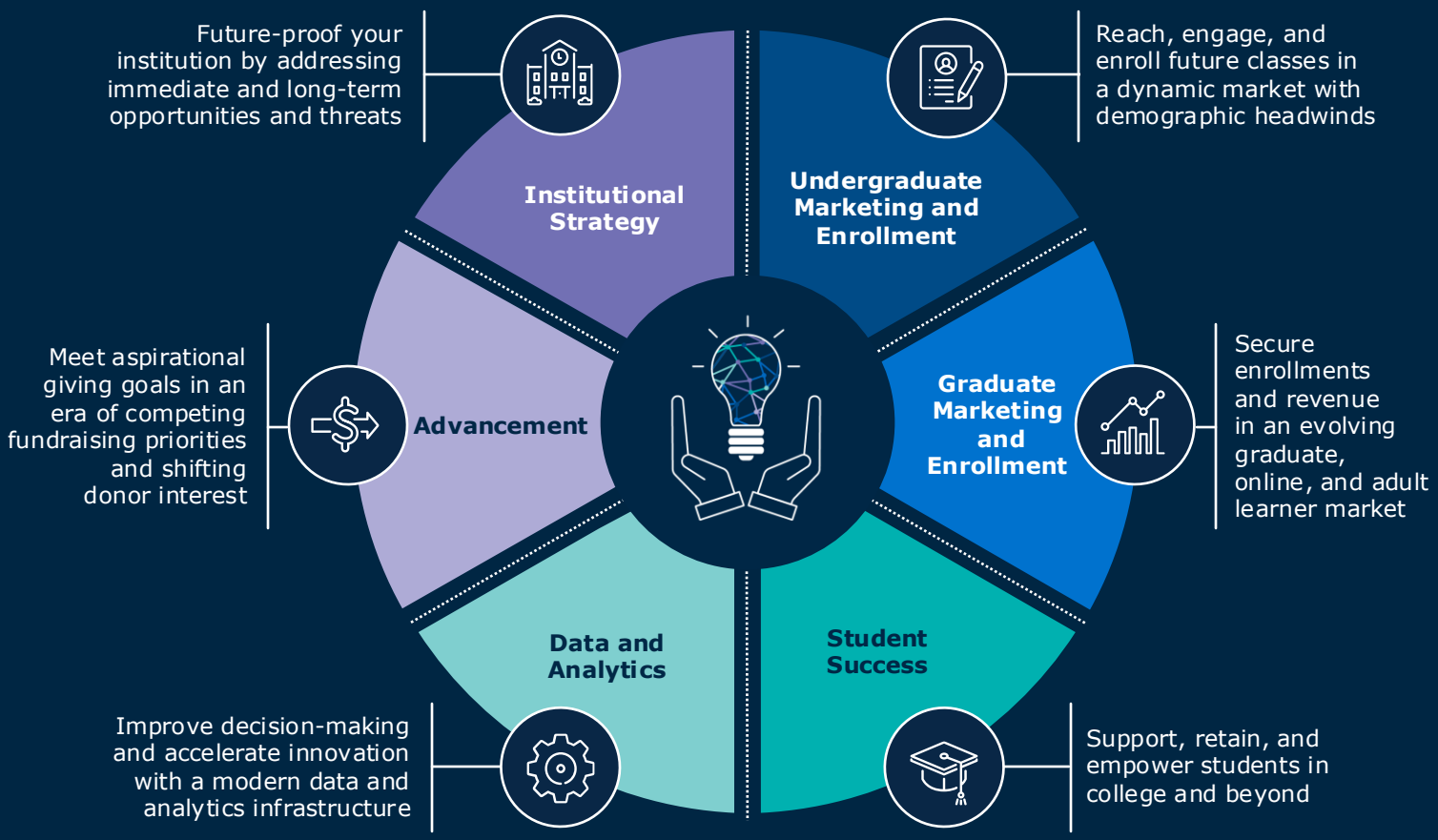


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# Interdisciplinary Program Starter Kit

## The Promise and Pitfalls of Interdisciplinary Programming

Colleges and universities face growing pressure from declining enrollments, tighter budgets, and rising expectations for post-graduation success. To stay relevant, they must rethink how academic programs are structured and ensure they meet the changing needs of both students and employers.

Interdisciplinary programs offer a promising path forward by blending expertise across fields to prepare graduates with the adaptable skills needed in a rapidly shifting job market. However, many institutions encounter significant challenges when launching these programs including unclear market demand, entrenched departmental silos, misaligned faculty incentives, and high curricular development costs. Overcoming these obstacles is essential to realizing the full potential of interdisciplinary programming.

## Six Hallmarks of Successful Interdisciplinary Program Design

This toolkit provides academic leaders with strategies to design interdisciplinary programs that meet demand, prepare students for real-world challenges, align internal interests, and minimize costs. EAB identified six hallmarks of the most successful interdisciplinary programs, outlined below. While many of these hallmarks apply to all new academic program development efforts, interdisciplinary programs involve a higher degree of complexity since institutions must invest more time upfront in building shared governance structures, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and aligning incentives across departments to avoid confusion, resource conflicts, and program failure.


**Meets Student Interests** | **Aligns with Employer Demand** | **Benefits From Clear Leadership & Structure** | **Rewards Unit and Faculty Participation** | **Minimizes Additive Costs** | **Meaningfully Integrates Disciplines**

This toolkit walks through each hallmark, providing academic leaders with:

- *A Failure Story* illustrating common challenges that arise when the hallmark is overlooked or poorly executed so leaders can sidestep pitfalls.
- *A Success Story* showcasing effective design and execution to demonstrate how leaders can attract students, align incentives across departments, and manage costs.
- *A Checklist* providing actionable steps and practical advice, enabling leaders to implement the hallmark with clarity and confidence.

### Audience

This starter guide is designed primarily for provosts, deans and their teams, department heads, and other academic leaders responsible for interdisciplinary program development and strategy.

### Sample Use Cases

- Reviewing new interdisciplinary undergraduate program proposals
- Assessing interdisciplinary opportunities as part of a dedicated university initiative (e.g., seed funding)
- Evaluating best practice examples of structures and programs on an interdisciplinary task force

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Meets Student Interests

HALLMARK

1

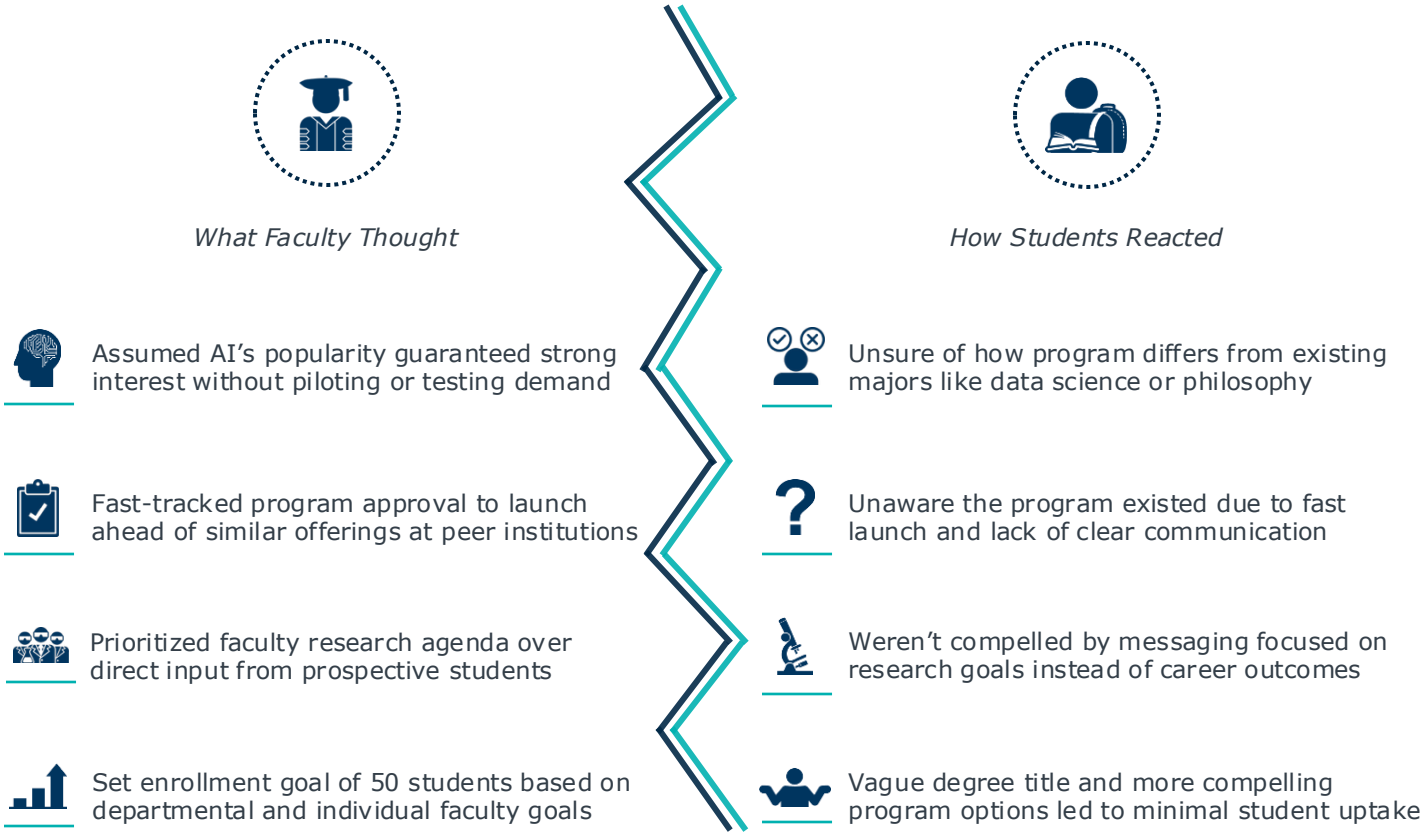
# Prioritizing Intellectual Interests Over Student Interests

Despite good intentions, many interdisciplinary programs fail because academic leaders misread student demand. Too often, institutions build programs around faculty enthusiasm without first validating student interest. Without this early testing, institutions risk building full-scale programs on assumptions that don't reflect how students actually choose what to study. Most students aren't swayed by curricular nuance or faculty credentials—they're motivated by clear career pathways, personal relevance, and the ability to make an impact. Programs that ignore these priorities often struggle to attract students, divert faculty time and resources from high-demand areas, and shut down due to repeated underperformance.

*Case in Brief: Central Polytechnic Institute's[1] Faculty-Driven Tech and Society Major*

- Large public university in the Northeast with 15,000 students known for strengths in computer science
- Leadership eager to expand interdisciplinary offerings to differentiate institution and boost national profile
- Faculty collaboration on AI ethics research sparked idea for new Tech and Society program, which was developed and launched rapidly without student input to stay ahead of peer institutions
- Broad program title led to confusion about academic focus and career outcomes
- First-year enrollment only reached five students, far short of the 50 anticipated

**Disconnect Between Faculty-Led Program Development and Student Interest**




1) University pseudonym.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Incubating Before You (Over)Invest

The most successful interdisciplinary programs begin by understanding what today's Gen Z students truly value in their enrollment decisions: career outcomes, flexibility, meaningful impact, and return on investment. These programs are built on robust data, including enrollment trends, common major/minor combinations, and direct student feedback, that help leaders identify and address unmet needs. Rather than relying on assumptions about interest, they continuously validate and cultivate demand within their student population to ensure demand.

*Case in Brief: Boise State University's Games, Interactive Media, & Mobile Technology (GIMM) Major*

- Large public university in Boise, Idaho enrolling 27,000 students
- President established College of Innovation and Design (CID) to rapidly prototype and incubate new academic programs outside of traditional college structures
- CID launched GIMM program in 2015 after identifying strong student interest and industry demand, with no existing department willing or able to lead
- GIMM program rapidly grew from 41 students to 224 in seven years, signaling strong market fit and demand
- After strong evaluation, GIMM transitioned out of CID into the College of Arts & Sciences (CAS) in 2023

## Validating Student Demand for GIMM Major from Idea to Impact

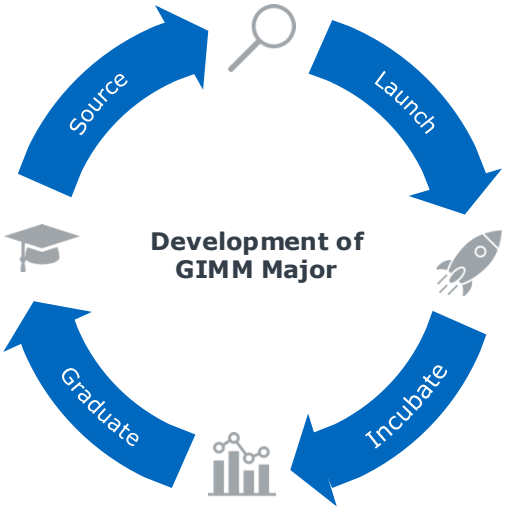
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

### 1 Moved Forward Despite Internal Constraints

- President prioritized launch to address growing regional need for applied technology programs
- Lack of unit capacity, willingness to launch cross-college program led to creation of new college outside of traditional structures

### 2 Prioritized Flexibility and Innovation from the Start

- Brought in adjuncts to stay flexible and fill expertise gaps before committing to permanent hires
- Embedded cohort model and created project- and community-based learning experiences




### 4 Monitored Performance to Guide Program Transition

- CID leaders evaluated program using standard rubric focused on student retention, enrollment trends, and financial sustainability
- Transitioned GIMM from CID to CAS in 2023 after sustained growth and identification of program leader

### 3 Sustained Growth Through Iterative Innovation

- Program grew from 41 to 224 students in seven years
- Added four new interdisciplinary courses in response to ongoing monitoring and student feedback, aligning skills to game/app design

Source: Boise State University, College of Innovation and Design Self-Study; EAB interviews and analysis.

Checklist

# Does Your Program Meet Student Interests?

Review the success behaviors for meeting student interests, checking off those your institution currently practices to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Leaders should aim to implement as many of these success behaviors as possible when designing and launching interdisciplinary programs.

## Student Demand

- ☐ Analyze internal enrollment trends (e.g., major/minor combinations, create your own majors) to assess latent student demand for interdisciplinary topics or areas.
- ☐ Pilot a course, minor, and/or track in related areas to test student demand before fully launching an interdisciplinary program.
- ☐ Prioritize programs that meet the four key motivations of Gen Z personas: flexibility, real-world impact, return on investment, and career security.

## Program Design

- ☐ Incorporate at least one high-demand or widely enrolled discipline (e.g., business, health sciences) to broaden appeal and connect to student career goals.
- ☐ Require quantitative or applied elements (e.g., analysis, project-based work, industry connections) in curriculum.

## Marketing

- ☐ Recruit peer influencers or student ambassadors each year to build program visibility (e.g., post on social media, wear program swag).
- ☐ Equip advisors with clear messaging and materials (e.g., one-pagers) to communicate the program's value and potential career pathways.

## Program Scalability

- ☐ Define quantitative enrollment targets at the start based on comparable programs and capacity to ensure financial sustainability and avoid overinvestments.
- ☐ Schedule program revitalization meetings, workshops if program fails to meet enrollment targets within two years

## Program Titling

*Clarity & Brevity*

- ☐ Use words that are easily definable and understandable
- ☐ Avoid overly academic phrasing (e.g., "studies," "synergy")
- ☐ Use fewer than five words
- ☐ Avoid commas and long lists

*Relevance & Resonance*

- ☐ Clearly connect to real-world problem or urgent issue
- ☐ Highlight pathways or skills that resonate with student goals
- ☐ Communicate relevance and ROI to students and parents
- ☐ Integrate ideas in cohesive or thematic way

*Career & Market Fit*

- ☐ Clearly signal related career paths degree prepares them for
- ☐ Include action-oriented descriptors (e.g., development)
- ☐ Use terms that will likely remain relevant over time (e.g., analytics)
- ☐ Include terms that are common in related job descriptions

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Aligns with Employer Demand

HALLMARK 2

# The Design-Demand Chasm

Institutions should only launch interdisciplinary programs when leaders can demonstrate strong employer demand. Yet measuring that demand can prove difficult, as these programs span multiple fields, confer skills that don't map onto a single job title or occupation, and target emerging industries where roles may not yet exist.

### *Case in Brief: Mountain Ridge College's[1] B.S. in Bioscience Systems and Engineering*

- Regional private university in the Mountain West known for excellence in STEM programs
- Launched B.S. in Bioscience Systems and Engineering in 2017 to tap into growing sustainability, biofuel sectors
- Faculty validated demand through a focus group of regional CEOs but failed to gather input from frontline professionals and hiring managers, leading to skewed understanding of employer needs and theoretical curriculum misaligned with actual job requirements
- Despite market analysis focused on occupational trends, graduates struggled to find jobs because hiring managers didn't understand the program's focus or how it compared to traditional engineering degrees
- Sunset program in 2024 due to low enrollment, poor program outcomes, and high costs

## One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

### *What They Did*

**Conducted Market Research**

Analyzed regional and national labor market trends using occupation-based search method on Lightcast[2], with BLS[3] projections for relevant occupations (e.g., agricultural engineer)

**Engaged with Regional Employers**

Conducted focus group of CEOs from regional companies across environmental consulting and renewable energy sectors to validate demand

**Focused Marketing on Career Outcomes**

Highlighted industry and employment trends from market research (e.g., average salaries, job growth) in marketing to emphasize ROI

### *What Went Wrong*

**Overstated Demand, Missed Key Skills**

Relied solely on occupation-based searches that captured irrelevant roles and overlooked key skills employers wanted

**Only Spoke to Executive Leaders**

Limited outreach to CEOs, leaving recruiters and managers unfamiliar with the program and how graduates' skillsets fit available roles

**Program Failed to Prepare Grads for Jobs**

Did not involve employers in program design, leading to gaps between promised career outcomes and the skills students gained

1) University pseudonym.
2) Previously Burning Glass Technologies.
3) Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Cracking the Code on Interdisciplinary Demand

Since employer demand for interdisciplinary programs is difficult to predict, successful interdisciplinary programs prioritize proactive and ongoing engagement with employers. This ensures the curriculum stays aligned with evolving workforce needs, equips students with in-demand, cross-cutting skills, and strengthens their pathways to meaningful careers.

*Case in Brief: Georgia Highlands College's B.S. in Building Information Modeling Management (BIMM)*

- Public college located in Rome, Georgia known for offering flexible and affordable degrees
- Launched B.S. in Building Information Modeling Management in 2022 to address labor shortages in engineering and construction industry alongside projected growth in Building Information Modeling (BIM) industry (e.g., increasingly becoming a requirement in state-funded construction projects)
- Collaborated with over six employers (e.g., Trimble, Audodesk) to build, launch, and sustain the program
- As one of only two institutions nationwide (and the only one in Georgia) offering a BIM program, GHC stands out as a premier destination for students seeking a career in digital construction

## Comprehensive Employer Engagement Drives Program Success and Expansion

GHC
Georgia Highlands College

**Conducted market research** and **surveyed industry leaders** to identify workforce gaps, revealing demand for BIM professionals

**Hired industry experts in BIM** to teach courses, ensuring relevance and real-world application

**Established Industry Advisory Board** of tech, construction, and engineering professionals (e.g., directors, specialists) to regularly review and adapt curriculum to evolving industry needs

Most institutions stop here

**Co-designed the curriculum with employers** (i.e., Trimble) to ensure industry alignment

**Built strategic employer partnerships** that secured access to donated space (e.g., SDS2 learning lab), equipment, and access to industry software

**100%**
Employment rate for graduates

**10%**
Above enrollment target (88 enrolled vs. 80 projected)

**2**
University partnerships (e.g., Georgia Tech dual enrollment) to expand access and reach

Source: AECbytes, GHC's BIMM Program: Shaping the Future of Digital Construction; Georgia Highlands College, BIMM; EAB interview and analysis.

Checklist

# Does Your Program Align with Employer Demand?

Review the success behaviors for aligning with employer demand, checking off those your institution currently practices to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Leaders should aim to implement as many of these success behaviors as possible when designing and launching interdisciplinary programs.

## Employer Demand Assessment

- ☐ Use a skills-based search approach when analyzing market data, supplementing with keyword and occupational search methods as necessary.
- ☐ Critically evaluate unusually high and low employer demand numbers in labor market analyses for interdisciplinary programs, as they may reflect flawed methodology rather than true market signals.
- ☐ Require program directors to gather input from frontline employees (e.g., hiring managers) through surveys or focus groups to confirm demand, identify essential skills, and align program with real-world hiring needs.

## Curriculum Design

- ☐ Co-design program curriculum with at least one employer partner to ensure skills alignment.
- ☐ Embed an internship or co-op requirement into the program curriculum to ensure students graduate with industry experience.
- ☐ Design and require a 1-3 credit career exploration course as part of the program to help students identify career paths, pitch the value of the degree, and build skills (e.g., resume building, evaluating job offers).

## Ongoing Evaluation and Employer Engagement

- ☐ Establish an employer advisory board that includes both executive and non-executive roles that reviews curriculum annually, recommends revisions, and helps facilitate internships and job placements.
- ☐ Establish a young alumni advisory board that includes 5-10 recent graduates to provide feedback on evolving job market skills, identify gaps in the current curriculum, and offer mentorship opportunities for current students.
- ☐ Survey employers after internships and capstone projects to identify student competencies and gaps in learning.
- ☐ Reassess labor market needs and update curriculum every 3-5 years based on employer input, industry trends, and advisory board feedback.
- ☐ Require faculty to build industry experience (e.g., faculty externships, industry sabbaticals, community engagement) and provide incentives for participation (e.g., stipends, course releases).

*Access EAB's New Program Launch Guidebook and Market Demand Validation Checklist here.*

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Ensures Clear Leadership & Structure

HALLMARK 3

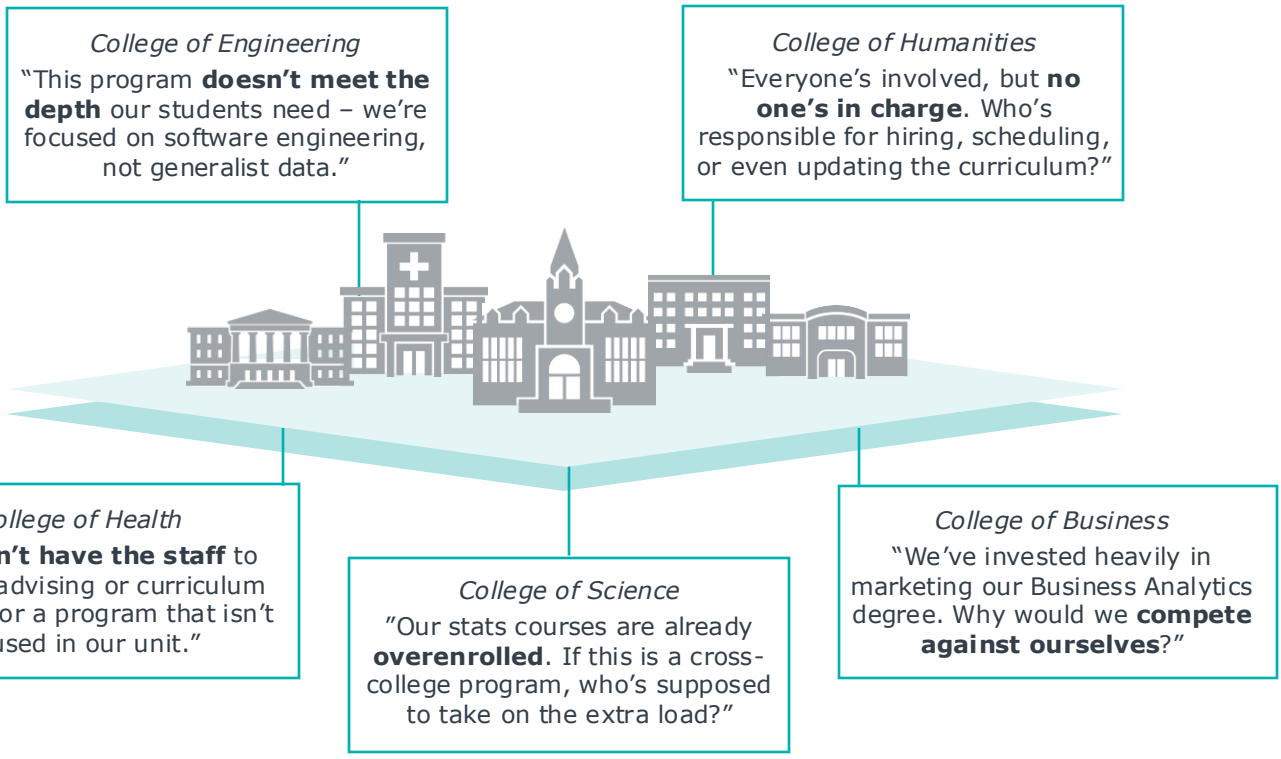
# Victims of Disciplinary Structures

Interdisciplinary programs often face challenges rooted in fragmented leadership and unclear ownership. Without a designated lead college, program director, or shared governance structure, key decisions around curriculum, staffing, and marketing can stall. As a result, faculty and administrators may operate in silos, uncertain of their roles and how to collaborate effectively. This lack of coordination can inadvertently lead to duplicative efforts, as departments develop similar programs to maintain control. Over time, what begins as an exciting cross-college opportunity can unravel into confusion, delays, and miscommunication, ultimately limiting the program's long-term potential.

### *Case in Brief: Midland State University's[1] Cross-College Data Analytics Program*

- Large public university in the Midwest enrolling 40,000 students
- Provost prioritized launch of interdisciplinary, cross-college data analytics program jointly owned by the colleges of Engineering, Humanities, Science, Health, and Business
- Program lacked clear academic home, program leader, and faculty expectations resulting in confusion around who was responsible for curriculum, staffing, and marketing
- Colleges continued to prioritize and promote their own data-focused degrees (e.g., Business Analytics), leaving the joint program without a distinct identity or marketing
- In year five, the program enrolled fewer than ten students

**Shared Ownership with No Accountability for Cross-College Data Analytics Program**




1) University pseudonym.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

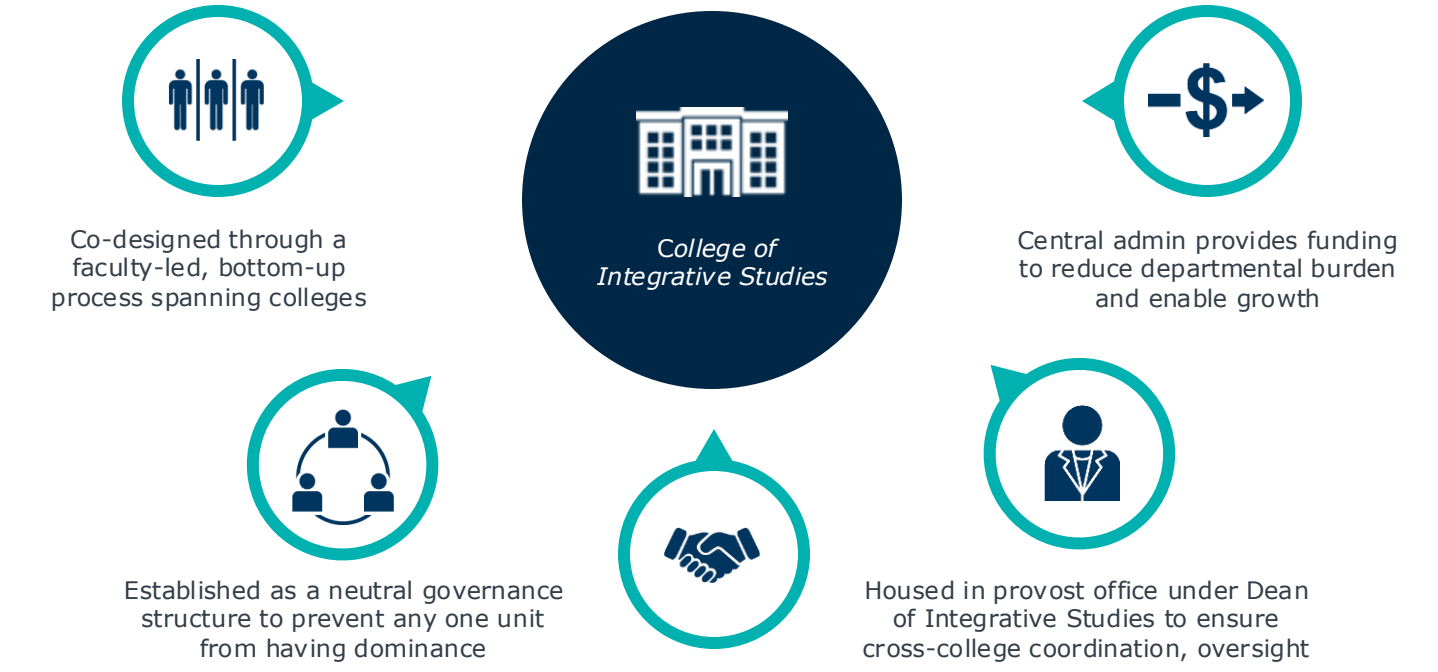
# Finding the Right Structure

To prevent confusion, academic leaders must assign clear ownership of interdisciplinary programs from the start. The most effective leaders establish where programs are housed, whether in an existing department, a new interdisciplinary unit, or a reorganized structure, and establish governance processes early on.

### *Case in Brief: Mississippi State University's College of Integrative Studies*

- Large public university located in Starkville, Mississippi enrolling over 22,000 students
- Launched College of Integrative Studies in 2025 to centralize interdisciplinary program development, enhance cross-college collaboration, and provide a home for programs that lack a clear fit in existing units
- Idea for new College of Integrative Studies came from faculty task forces, who supported new interdisciplinary program development but had no capacity to own these new programs themselves
- Dean of College of Integrative Studies, who reports directly to the provost, outlines benefits of healthy cannibalization to partner units to secure early buy-in for new interdisciplinary programs

**Five Components of A Successful Centralized Interdisciplinary College Launch**




| Data Science | Tourism |
|---|---|
| Built concentrations from majors who historically taught students interested in data science (e.g., math, computer science) to preserve credit hours | Students complete MBA prerequisites within undergrad major, enabling a 4+1 pathway and advancing business school's goal to diversify MBA pipeline |

Source: Mississippi State University, New College of Integrative Studies at MSU to Transcend Traditional Classroom Education; EAB interviews and analysis.

Checklist

# Does Your Program Ensure Clear Leadership & Structure?

Review the success behaviors for ensuring clear leadership and structure, checking off those your institution currently practices to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Leaders should aim to implement as many of these success behaviors as possible when designing and launching interdisciplinary programs.

## Program Structure & Ownership

- ☐ Require the provost's office to assign an administrative home for all cross-college interdisciplinary programs.
- ☐ Designate a single program owner (e.g., program director, VP for interdisciplinary programs) for each interdisciplinary program.
- ☐ Select interdisciplinary program leaders based on their collaboration skills and organizational acumen, including candidates outside the proposing unit when appropriate.

## Program Governance

- ☐ Establish a standing cross-departmental advisory body with a representative from the provost office, deans from sponsoring colleges, and at least one faculty member from all contributing disciplines, selected by department chairs or elected by peers.
- ☐ Set a regular meeting cadence for the cross-departmental advisory body that meets at least once per semester to coordinate curriculum and ensure the program upholds the interdisciplinary mission.
- ☐ Create a governance charter that outlines clear roles and responsibilities for key areas, including hiring, budget, curriculum, and faculty promotion.

## Program Ownership Considerations

| *Within Departments (e.g., lives within Biology department)* | *Outside Departments (e.g., reports directly to Provost or Dean)* | *Reorganized Departments (e.g., units organized by interdisciplinary themes)* |
|---|---|---|
| *Best when:*<br>• *Program has natural disciplinary anchor (e.g., business analytics)*<br>• *Need to quickly launch program* | *Best when:*<br>• *Involves three or more units*<br>• *No existing unit is willing or able to house the program* | *Best when:*<br>• *Interdisciplinarity is strategic priority*<br>• *University has many interdisciplinary programs scattered across units* |
| ☐ Ensure dept capacity to support program (e.g., admin, advising) | ☐ Delay new staff or faculty hires until program shows growth | ☐ Base reorg on analysis of program overlap and resource synergies |
| ☐ Choose host dept whose course offerings and faculty expertise best match program goals | ☐ Leverage existing courses and structures when possible to avoid unnecessary duplication | ☐ Host structured sessions with faculty from impacted depts early to clarify goals, surface concerns |
| ☐ Prioritize the dept that minimizes accreditation complexity | ☐ Regularly reevaluate placement of centrally housed programs | ☐ Reorganize around defined academic identity (e.g., Health and Society) |

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Rewards Unit & Faculty Participation

HALLMARK 4

# If Only Everyone Wanted to Collaborate…

Interdisciplinary programs often face challenges not because faculty don't support the concept, but due to the absence of clear incentives and recognition for participation. Departments worry about losing credit for enrollment or tuition revenue while faculty often take on additional work without capacity or recognition. Deans, balancing multiple priorities, often see budget models as a limiting factor due to resource constraints and a lack of incentives for collaboration. Without clear structures outlining who benefits, who pays, and how to sustain these efforts long-term, most units default to protecting their own programs which can stop interdisciplinary progress.

### *Case in Brief: Western College of Technology's[1] Data Narrative Program*

- Regional public university on the West Coast enrolling 8,000 students with strong ties to regional employers
- Provost proposed new interdisciplinary Data Narrative program based on conversations with industry partners
- Deans and faculty resisted development of new program due to unclear incentives, misunderstandings of the budget model, limited staffing, and lack of recognition for developing or teaching new interdisciplinary courses
- To launch the new program quickly and avoid conflict, departments evenly divided existing courses from their own catalogs to secure equal revenue shares, resulting in major with little integration and low student interest

## Collaboration Without the Right Incentives Falls Flat

*Provost*: Our employers say they want data and communication skills. Let's launch a Data Narrative program across Data Science and English with new interdisciplinary courses.

*Dean, Engineering*: Our budget model doesn't reward me teaching in this program unless we get full credit for the majors. Otherwise, it's a lot of work just to get a few more dollars.

*Dean, CAS[2]*: English is already stretched thin teaching gen ed, running the major, and advising. We can't pile on a new program unless we get more resources and staff.

*Provost*: Our budget model actually allocates funding by SCH[3], not majors, so you'll get resources for every course you teach. We should build some new courses just for this degree too.

*Faculty Member*: We're being asked to build new interdisciplinary courses on top of full loads. No course releases or formal recognition – and it doesn't even count toward tenure!

*Provost*: What can we do to get this launched quickly? This is a priority area for our industry partners and students have shown interest in connecting these disciplines.

*Curriculum Committee*: Let's just divide the curriculum evenly between the two disciplines. We can split majors and revenue so everyone is on board, and we can launch this program quickly.

### *Pitfalls of Approach*

**Limited Understanding of Budget Model Fuels Mistrust**

When faculty don't understand budget models, they may assume their efforts won't be resourced or recognized.

**Lack of Incentives Undermines Buy-In**

Without formal recognition, funding, or career incentives, faculty may deprioritize or disengage from ID work.

**No Different From a Double Major**

With no unique coursework or integrated experiences, students didn't see the value and chose not to enroll.

1) University pseudonym.
2) College of Arts and Sciences.
3) Student credit hours.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Setting Clear Funding Expectations from the Start

Successful institutions address incentive challenges by proactively defining funding allocations, faculty roles, and expectations upfront. They typically allocate resources based on student credit hours, use standardized memorandums of understanding (MOUs) to formalize revenue sharing and faculty workloads, and require multi-year cost and enrollment projections before launching programs. Academic leaders should also support faculty with course releases and formal recognition to foster a campus-wide culture of interdisciplinary collaboration.

## *Case in Brief: West Virginia University's Interdepartmental Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)*

- Large public university in Morgantown, West Virginia enrolling 24,000 students
- New interdepartmental programs housed in the provost's office created confusion around roles and funding
- Developed interdepartmental MOU to clarify resource flows, teaching responsibilities, course offerings, and cost-sharing for adjunct professors and course overloads
- MOU process involved deans, associate provosts for curriculum and undergraduate education, vice provost, and communications team

### Interdepartmental Program MOU for Esports Program[1]

WestVirginiaUniversity.

FINANCES AND RESOURCES

The academic units will receive 80% of the course level tuition revenue generated by the courses they offer in the program. The other 20% of the course level tuition will go to the Intercollegiate Programs in support of student services, staff, and operations (e.g., travel, summer admin work).

The Parties shall identify a Program Director whose salary and benefits shall be funded by the College of Applied Human Sciences.

Allocates funding primarily based on student credit hours, with additional support for program admin costs

STUDENTS AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Students will be granted a diploma with the names of all deans from participating academic units. Students will be invited and allowed to attend the graduation ceremonies of all participating academic units.

Credits all academic units partnering to offer the program

CATALOG AND CURRICULUM

The College of Applied Human Sciences (CAHS) shall be responsible for the following course schedule: SM310 Esports Business, SM321 Esports Governance and SM322 Esports Marketing. Course schedules should include frequency of course offerings, maximum capacity for each section, number of sections offered each term, faculty assigned to those courses, and the percentage of that faculty's workload that assignment will be.

Specifies the unit responsible for major courses and sets faculty workload expectations upfront

FACULTY

The Parties shall ensure that faculty contracts and workload assignments are updated to align with Program needs. The Parties should also clarify expectations for what will constitute expected departmental and programmatic service contributions and expectations for faculty attendance and participation in program meetings for both the unit of appointment and for the intercollegiate program. Faculty need to have interdisciplinary work added to their contract and evaluation.

Updates faculty contracts to reflect ID teaching expectations to ensure participation is recognized

This MOU shall remain in effect for three years unless terminated by any Party with the approval of the Provost's Office. This MOU may be modified at any time upon mutual consent in writing of the Parties.

Builds in flexibility with fixed MOU terms and clear off-ramps for future adjustments

1) This MOU is based on West Virginia University's approach but does not represent the actual agreement signed for the Esports program.

Source: West Virginia University, Intercollegiate Program Memorandum of Understanding; EAB interviews and analysis.

Checklist

# Does Your Program Reward Unit & Faculty Participation?

Review the success behaviors for rewarding unit and faculty participation, checking off those your institution currently practices to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Leaders should aim to implement as many of these success behaviors as possible, while recognizing that differences in budget models may limit full adoption.

## Budget & Resource Allocation

- ☐ Allocate funding primarily based on student credit hours (not majors) to align resources with instructional effort.
- ☐ Require programs to complete a templatized MOU that formalizes all funding responsibilities and expectations (e.g., revenue split, responsibility for program costs, faculty contributions, process for changing curriculum).
- ☐ Embed performance-based budget adjustments tied to interdisciplinary teaching or enrollment growth into the budget model.
- ☐ Require all interdisciplinary programs to create a revenue share agreement with defined percentage allocations.
- ☐ Require multi-year cost and enrollment modeling before program launch as part of the approval process.
- ☐ Make interdisciplinary collaboration a condition for new department funding and faculty lines.
- ☐ Create a central interdisciplinary grant or innovation fund to support pilot courses, program development, and cross-unit collaboration.
- ☐ Incentivize collaboration with units potentially impacted by enrollment shifts from new interdisciplinary programs by creating structures that deliver mutual benefits, such as concentrations or 4+1 graduate degree pathways.

## Infrastructure & Administration

- ☐ Require interdisciplinary program heads to complete budget model training to address questions and misconceptions.
- ☐ Develop standardized MOU templates for new interdisciplinary programs to help academic leaders avoid time-consuming negotiations and streamline the process of defining resource allocation, governance, and responsibilities.
- ☐ Centralize advising, marketing, and administrative support for interdisciplinary programs to reduce duplication.

## Faculty Recognition & Incentives

- ☐ Offer course releases and/or stipends for faculty developing new interdisciplinary courses.
- ☐ Require cross-departmental representation on promotion and tenure committees for faculty engaged in interdisciplinary work, with clear definitions and expectations for their contributions.
- ☐ Establish endowed professorships, fellowships, and/or formal awards for interdisciplinary teaching.

*Access EAB's Aligning Institutional Budget Models to Strategic Goals research report here.*

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Minimizes Additive Costs

HALLMARK 5

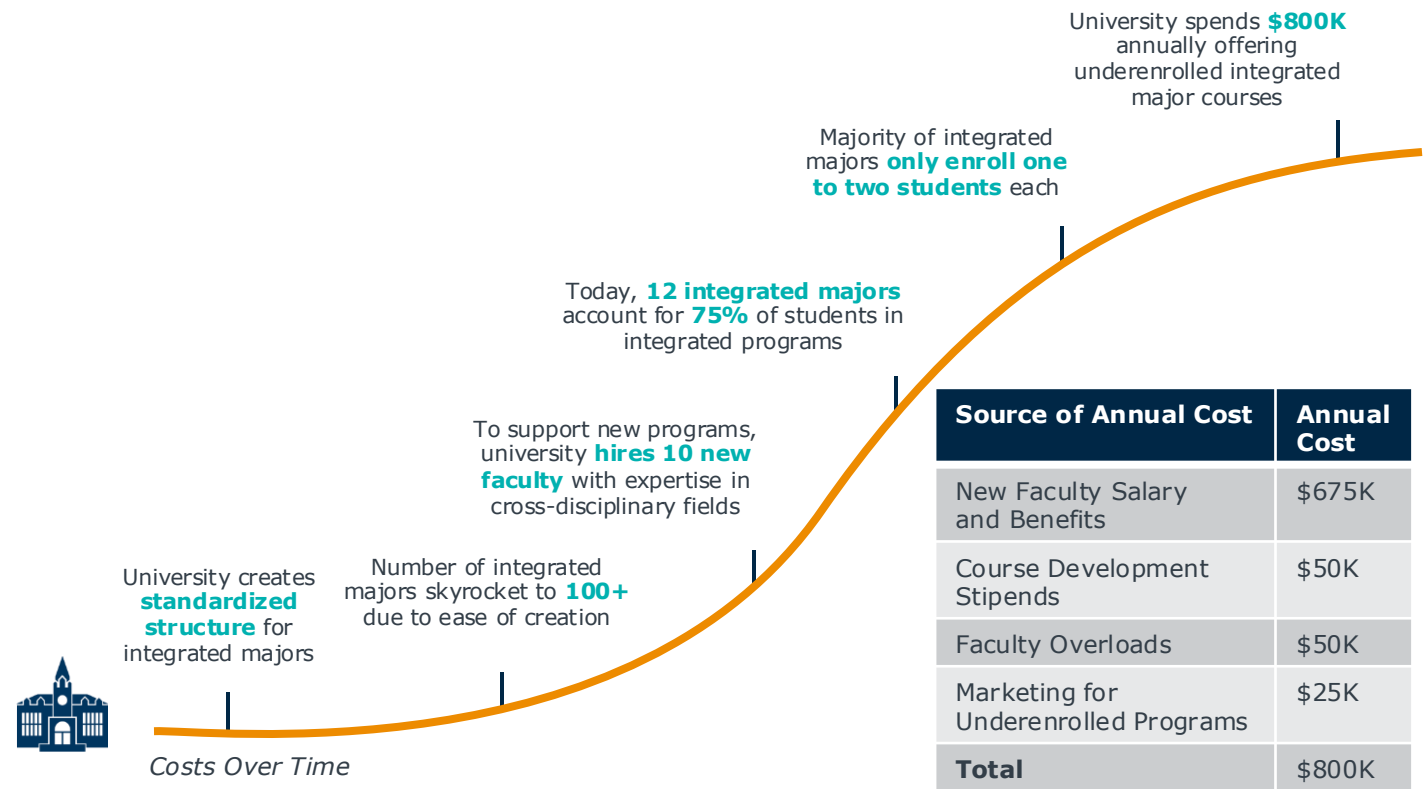
# Efficiency Plays Can Quickly Backfire

Academic leaders often design new interdisciplinary programs with the hope of growing enrollment while maximizing resource efficiency. Institutions typically already have strong courses, faculty, and resources—the opportunity lies in strategically repackaging these assets into innovative programs that offer greater value for students. But interdisciplinary programs often carry hidden costs, including new courses, faculty hires, and increased administrative complexity, that can add up quickly. Without disciplined design, efforts to save money through interdisciplinary programs can easily spiral into overinvestment and unsustainable programs.

*Case in Brief: Maple University's[1] Integrated Majors*

- Large private selective university in the South
- Launched integrated majors to combine two disciplines (e.g., computer science & English) into single degree
- Standardized structure (i.e., eight courses from each discipline, plus two newly developed integrated courses that bridge the two fields) reduces administrative burden and ensures consistency across programs
- Streamlined development enabled launch of over 100 integrated majors and 10 new faculty hires, but student demand remains concentrated in just a handful of integrated majors
- University spends $800K annually on low-enrolled courses
- Growing pressure to reduce complexity and control costs prompts leaders to sunset 50+ programs

**The Hidden Costs of Interdisciplinary Program Proliferation**




| Source of Annual Cost | Annual Cost |
|---|---|
| New Faculty Salary and Benefits | $675K |
| Course Development Stipends | $50K |
| Faculty Overloads | $50K |
| Marketing for Underenrolled Programs | $25K |
| **Total** | $800K |

1) University pseudonym.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Living Up to Efficiency Ambitions

To create an efficient interdisciplinary program, academic leaders should leverage existing courses and faculty expertise to reduce unnecessary new course development. Minimizing additional administrative roles, like advisors, can also help control costs until enrollment justifies expansion.

### *Case in Brief: Carnegie Mellon University's Intercollege BXA Program*

- Large, private, selective university located in Pittsburgh, PA known for excellence in arts, science, and tech
- Developed intercollege BXA programs (i.e., Bachelor's of X + the Arts) jointly delivered by the College of Fine Arts and partner college
- Currently enrolls 150+ students across five degrees, combining Fine Arts with Humanities, Science, Computer Science, Engineering, and Engineering Studies
- Only approves new BXA program development after sustained student interest in specific degree combination
- All programs draw on existing courses and all students complete shared BXA core, eliminating the need for new course development and enabling scalable growth with minimal added costs

**Shared Courses Provide Model for Sustainable Interdisciplinary Growth**

Carnegie Mellon University

*Sample Bachelor of Computer Science and Arts Program Curriculum*

| *General Education Requirements* | *Computer Science Concentration* | *Music Performance Concentration* | *BXA Required Courses* |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Writing<br>• Mathematics<br>• Science & Engineering<br>• Economic, Political, & Social Institutions<br>• Cognition, Choice & Behavior | • Foundations of Programming and Computer Science<br>• Computation<br>• Programming<br>• Data Structures and Algorithms<br>• Computer Systems<br>• Theoretical Computer Science<br>• Mathematics<br>• Computer Science Electives | • Harmony<br>• Eurhythmics<br>• Solfege<br>• Western Music History<br>• Repertoire and Listening<br>• Studio<br>• Ensemble Performance<br>• Music Performance Electives | • Students complete **one BXA Seminar each year**, where they explore interdisciplinary methods, analyze disciplinary frameworks, and develop original research to prepare for their capstone project<br>• Final BXA Seminar serves as a **Capstone Course**, spanning two semesters and blending computer science and music performance; one student built a game to teach piano using a computer keyboard |

All BXA students follow shared core curriculum to promote collaboration, build community

Newly developed BXA programs require no net-new courses

**$250K** estimated annual savings[1]

1) EAB assumptions based on course releases/stipends for new course development and faculty hires.

Source: Carnegie Mellon University, Bachelor of Computer Science and Arts Degree Program and Capstone Project; EAB interviews and analysis.

Checklist

# Does Your Program Minimize Added Costs?

Review the success behaviors for minimizing additive costs, checking off those your institution currently practices to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Leaders should aim to implement as many of these success behaviors as possible when designing and launching interdisciplinary programs.

## Course Development & Design

- ☐ Limit new course development to six or fewer to encourage efficiency and minimize unnecessary proliferation.
- ☐ Require new program proposals to include analyses of existing course offerings (e.g., statistics, research methods).
- ☐ Prioritize central provost-office funding for new interdisciplinary programs that incorporate at least 80% existing courses into their curriculum.
- ☐ Offer incentives (e.g., development grants) to faculty who design courses that can be shared across multiple interdisciplinary programs.

## Enrollment Management & Class Size

- ☐ Establish strategic enrollment caps (e.g., program will not enroll more then 50 students in first three years) for new interdisciplinary programs to balance financial sustainability with infrastructure and capacity constraints.
- ☐ Require team-taught courses to meet at least double the minimum enrollment threshold for single-instructor courses (e.g., 12 students if the standard minimum is six) to ensure cost efficiency.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Meaningfully Integrates Disciplines

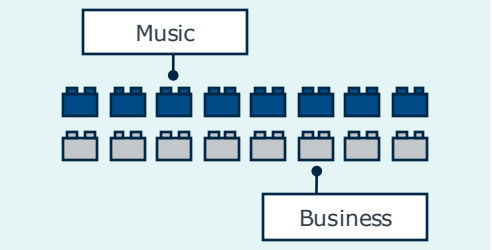
HALLMARK 6

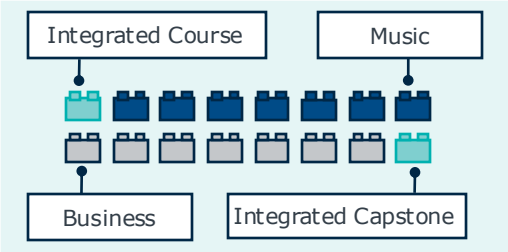
# Navigating Common Integration Failures

Interdisciplinary programs aim to help students think across disciplinary boundaries, solve complex problems, and connect ideas from multiple fields. But when programs fail to balance integrated[1] and core disciplinary courses, they often fall short of their goals, failing to deepen student learning or deliver on the promise of interdisciplinary education. Most interdisciplinary programs fall into one of three common traps:

### The Mashup: Combine Fields Without Ensuring Connections

Laurel College's[2] B.A. in Music Business relies exclusively on existing music and business courses, leaving students with strong disciplinary knowledge, but little understanding of the music industry. Without real integration, students question the program's value compared to a double major and develop limited synthesis, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.



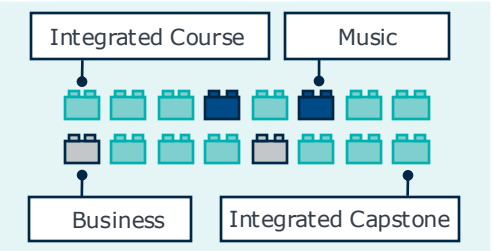




### The Bookend: Limit Integration to Intro and Capstone Courses

Pinecrest Valley University[2] added integrated intro and capstone courses to their B.A. in Music Business. However, without ongoing interdisciplinary application, students quickly reverted to siloed thinking and lacked the integrative skills needed for the capstone.

### The Overinvestment: Integrate Almost Every Course

Caldera University's[2] B.A. in Music Business relies heavily on new integrated courses, helping students build industry-specific skills like concert management but leaving gaps in foundational areas like music theory and financial accounting. Despite being truly interdisciplinary, the program struggled to attract students due to its complex curriculum. High costs and low enrollment led Caldera to consider sunsetting the program.




### Integrated Courses in Practice: X-Labs Classes Emphasize ID Thinking and Learning

JMU JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

#### Collaborative

- Taught by a cross-disciplinary teaching team, occasionally including an industry expert
- Require team-based projects, bringing together students from different disciplines

#### Applied

- Includes hands-on activities (e.g., building prototypes, research interviews)
- Connects learning to career through direct engagement with employers (e.g., employer-sponsored projects)

#### Tackles Real-World Problems

- Focuses on solving a grand challenge (e.g., organized retail crime, GenAI and national security)
- Draws on knowledge and methods from multiple disciplines (e.g., engineering, health, and math to solve issues faced by small farms)

1) Collaborative courses that explore interdisciplinary intersections and apply interdisciplinary thinking to solve complex, real-world challenges.
2) University pseudonym.

Source: James Madison University, X-Labs Courses; The Chronicle of Higher Education, No Textbooks, No Lectures, and No Right Answers. Is This What Higher Education Needs?; EAB interviews and analysis.

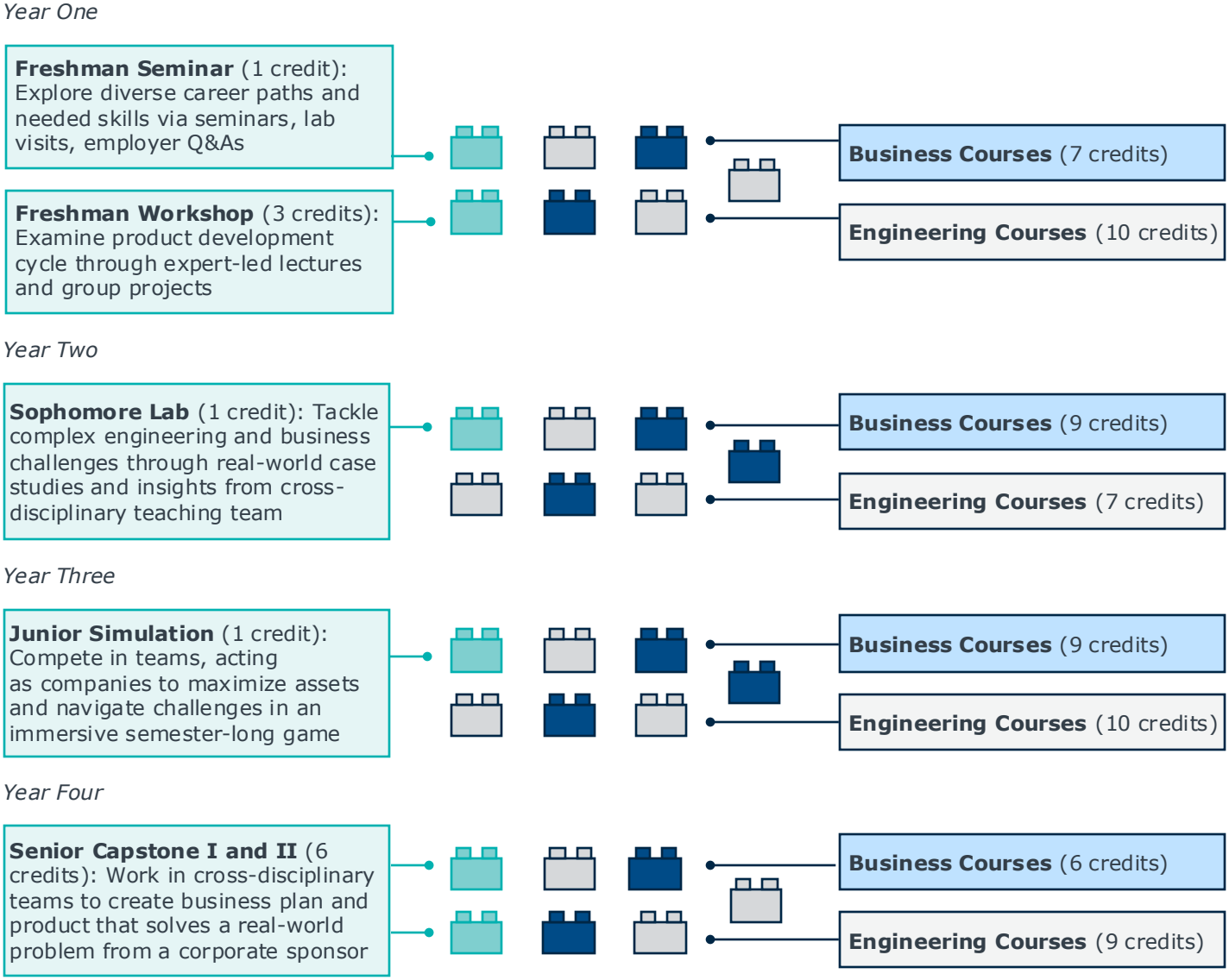
# Meaningfully Bringing Disciplines Together

Institutions should design interdisciplinary programs with up to six integrated courses that explicitly combine content and methods from multiple disciplines. These courses should be spread throughout the curriculum to maintain student engagement with interdisciplinary thinking while ensuring they gain knowledge in core disciplinary subjects. This approach also minimizes unnecessary curricular complexity and keeps program development costs manageable.

### *Case in Brief: Lehigh University's Inter-College Programs*

- Selective private research university located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania with over 7,000 students
- Elevated interdisciplinary education as a strategic priority, with a focus on expanding selective inter-college honors programs that cross boundaries between fields and better prepare students for careers
- Offers four inter-college programs, including Business and Engineering, Computer Science and Business, Engineering and Arts & Sciences, and newly launched Business and Health (beginning Fall 2025)
- Each program requires three to six integrated courses throughout the curriculum, ensuring students can clearly make disciplinary connections and apply them to real-world applications by end of program

**Embedding Applied Learning into Every Year of Integrated Business and Engineering Program**




Source: Lehigh University, Interdisciplinary and Inter-College Undergraduate Study and Strategic Plan Initiatives; EAB interviews and analysis.

Checklist

# Does Your Program Meaningfully Integrate Disciplines?

Review the success behaviors for meaningfully integrating disciplines, checking off those your institution currently practices to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Leaders should aim to implement as many of these success behaviors as possible when designing and launching interdisciplinary programs.

## Program Structure

- ☐ Only approve programs that include three to six integrated courses that address connections between disciplines.
- ☐ Require at least one integrated course per year to provide students enough opportunities to apply interdisciplinary thinking and problem-solving throughout the program.
- ☐ Prioritize collaborative and hands-on learning (e.g., team teaching, simulations, team-based projects) over lecture-based or textbook-heavy instruction in integrated courses.
- ☐ Require a culminating, integrated capstone experience focused on application over research.

## Faculty Support and Incentives

- ☐ Provide full teaching credit to each faculty member participating in team-taught courses.
- ☐ Prioritize central funding for faculty to develop new integrated courses over traditional disciplinary courses.
- ☐ Offer incentives (e.g., stipends, course release) for interdisciplinary faculty training and course design.
- ☐ Provide structured, hands-on training programs for faculty that offer deeper learning and practice in collaborative teaching (e.g., multi-session trainings, shadowing opportunities).
- ☐ Publish clear, accessible team-teaching policies—including definitions, instructor limits, and credit allocations—on public platforms such as the provost's office website.

## Student Success

- ☐ Require direct employer involvement in at least one integrated course (e.g., co-designing a course, sponsoring a project, joining a teaching team) to connect learning to career pathways.
- ☐ Evaluate student outcomes every three to five years in integrated courses, redesigning as necessary.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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## ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.