To: Interested Faculty in Humanities and Related Fields

From: James Chandler, Director, Center for Disciplinary Innovation

The 2008-2009 academic year will mark the launch of a new Center for Disciplinary Innovation (CDI). The Center will begin its work with generous funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, from the Division of Humanities and from the Office of the Provost. It will be allocated a new “smart” classroom in Regenstein Library for the conduct of its pedagogical work. Over the course of the past year, our idea has been taken up by the Humanities Institutes at Berkeley, Cambridge, and Columbia, each of which has formed its own Center for Disciplinary Innovation. The Mellon Foundation has agreed to fund the work of all four centers, which have formed a small consortium to address common problems in a variety of distinctive ways.

I am writing now to explain the genesis and rationale of our own Center, to outline its principles of operation, and, most immediately, to issue a call for proposals. We need to get an early start on this process in order to give the relevant Departments advanced notice of which faculty will be involved and what courses will be offered. Proposals should be submitted by Wednesday, November 14.

I. Genesis and Rationale

The idea for a new Center grew immediately out of the Mellon-funded “Disciplines” project at the Franke Institute, and it specifically responds to the overall rubric of the program under which Mellon generously granted us the support just about four years ago: how to reconnect the Humanities centers and institutes to their respective parent institutions. The opportunity to develop the plan arose in the midst of a renewed debate on our campus about the role of some of our interdisciplinary Committees at the University, a debate that stretches back more than a decade. It seemed to several colleagues involved in the Disciplines project that the time was ripe to explore how the rich conversations we had been pursuing might be brought home to our own University. (This was something that we had foreseen, even vaguely promised, in our initial proposal for the project.) So, in consultation with Danielle Allen, we created a special working group under the auspices of the Disciplines project to address a question that, in shorthand, we called the future of interdisciplinary studies at the University of Chicago.

This committee, chaired by Bruce Lincoln, included members from many fields of study; many of us (but not all) hold memberships in one or more Committees. We came to a number of key determinations early on. The first was that, though we could identify this or that feature of the changing order of the disciplines, we were in no position to outline substantively what their larger configuration might look like in the coming years. The second determination was that we would not propose a new Committee for the University. We did spend some time considering that route, discussing related programs in other universities (the Rhetoric program at Berkeley, for example), and examining various topical possibilities for such an entity. But in the end we decided that the effects of such an entity would be too limited. We wanted something more in the way of a formal mechanism, something accessible to many fields of study. The third
determination was that the formal structure we invented should be at once useful in itself in the short term and helpful in diagnosing the longer-term issues. We decided that the level on which this intervention should take place—the one where the disciplines could be engaged most seriously—was not the level of undergraduate teaching, nor that of faculty research collaboration, but rather that of our graduate programs. And finally, we determined that what we created had to have a sense of liberation. The bourgeoing of all the new “studies” has meant a proliferation of workshops, programs, centers, and institutes (including “humanities centers and institutes” such as the Franke), and this proliferation has been driving us all to frantic distraction. We wanted to make it possible to work practically toward a longer-term solution to the problem with a degree of reflective deliberation. This would be a new center to help us break with the very tendency toward adding new centers, to help us think our way toward a new disciplinary dynamic.

II. Operations of the Center

This is the rationale, then, of a new site for graduate team-teaching across the disciplines, a new “Center for Disciplinary Innovation”—a place for pedagogical collaboration and for reflection on the implications of new fields and practices. Such an initiative might be mistaken for simply a graduate version of another program, “Big Problems,” a team-teaching program sponsored in part by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation and already successfully operating under the auspices of the Franke Institute. The key distinction, though is that the “Big Problems” program largely brackets the question of the disciplines, focusing instead on the “big problem” at hand (e.g. “Is Development Sustainable?” or “Language and Culture”). The Center for Disciplinary Innovation, by contrast, will keep the disciplinary questions continually in focus.

Thus, when two faculty propose a course for the CDI, they will have to present a course-rationale framed not only in respect to substantive issues but also in respect to the disciplinary contexts: why the course cannot be offered in the usual curricular structures, how such a course, or another like it, might advance our understanding of where the disciplines are and where they might be going. Like the research fellows program at the Franke, moreover, faculty teaching in the CDI will constitute a fellowship. The teaching fellows will pool certain resources for speakers and they will share their experiences teaching in this experimental program. This way, in addition to generating some attractively collaborative graduate teaching and to creating vital new teaching experiences, the CDI should be developing an ongoing conversation about the direction of the disciplines. And this can only help us to make better judgments for the intellectual organization of the university of the future.

The basic outlines of the Center’s work can be summarized under the following points:

*Two courses per quarter, six per academic year. Two professors per course, at least one of whom must have affiliation with the Humanities Division.

*No set curriculum; teaching proposals to be solicited by the Center and vetted by Franke Board. Emphasis in courses is to be on practice, critical analysis, and synthetic dialogue. Synergy between courses will not be a criterion of selection. Selection made in Autumn quarter for following academic year.
The Center will require a group meeting of seminars at the end of each quarter to reflect critically on disciplines. Within seminars, student collaboration across disciplines is to be encouraged but not mandated.

Enrollment by application to faculty, capped at twenty per course. Courses cross-listed in “home” departments of faculty.

Two distinguished visitors per year, each to co-teach one seminar at the Center and to teach solo one course in a host department.

Each participating faculty member should receive credit for teaching a full course at the graduate level. Courses taught at the Center should not come at the expense of the College.

Initial run of four years, academic years 2008-2009 through 2011-12; review in third year.

III. Proposals

The CDI invites proposals for courses from University of Chicago faculty. As part of your proposal, please include a CV. One faculty member from each proposed team must have affiliation with the Humanities Division. Normally, but not necessarily, the faculty should come from different Departments, but in all instances the issues raised and perspectives represented should cross conventional disciplinary lines. We are soliciting proposals not only for internal collaboration, but also for collaboration from outside the University (i.e. for team-teaching with a colleague from another University). If you are proposing a course that will involve a colleague from another University, please provide a CV and contact information for the colleague so that he or she may be considered as a CDI visiting scholar candidate. The CDI will support the visitor’s teaching residence with stipend and housing / transportation expenses.

Faculty proposals should include a description of the seminar and its goals, along with a provisional syllabus. Please indicate the quarter in which it is to be offered; flexibility as to the quarter may help the success of an application. And, as explained above, faculty proposing a course will need to present a rationale for the course framed not only in respect to its substantive issues, but also in respect to the disciplinary contexts.

These proposals will be evaluated and courses selected by the Governing Board at the Franke Institute for the Humanities on the basis of breadth, originality, and intellectual promise. Next year’s roster of courses will be announced at the end of the Autumn 2007 quarter. Please email proposals to mav@uchicago.edu. Proposals must be received no later than Wednesday, November 14.

I. Faculty Partnership (two co-instructors) (Please attach CV’s)
   Name, Department
   Name, Department

II a. Provisional Course Title

II b. Provisional quarter in which course will be taught
   (Please indicate order of preferred quarter (1, 2, and 3)
III. Course Proposal (1-2 pages)