

Call for Proposals

College Commons: 2010-2011

About the College Commons:

The College Commons Committee invites proposals for 2010-11 centering upon the topic “Rethinking the Human.” The College Commons is designed to foster Uncommon Conversations across disciplinary boundaries. The “dream of the commons,” as we expressed it last year, is to bring together faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and community members to discuss ideas we hold in common, to challenge our pre-conceptions, and to frame new questions. We offer faculty the opportunity to create the kinds of programs they hope to attend, to investigate new fields and to provoke exciting exchanges, to initiate the unexpected conversation that may transform your own academic pursuits.

This year’s theme:

From the science of robotics to the mapping of the human genome; from evolution to extinction; from Hamlet’s invocation of “What a piece of work is man” to the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart,” ideas of the human permeate discourse in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. From human biology to humane letters to the human sciences, the very term seems to underwrite what we do. And yet, within and without the university, “the human” is being challenged: artificial intelligence asks how much of our humanity can be embodied in machines, while critiques of “identity politics” and the hermeneutics of suspicion ask how we know who we are. Gerontology asks how long we will live and neo-natal units ask where life begins. While Philosophy asks if our minds really speak to our bodies, Primatology asks if we shouldn’t replace “humane letters” with “primate letters.” Is what makes us “humane” what makes us “human,” and where do we draw the line between “species,” between “genders,” between “man” and “animal” and the inanimate? Within every discipline the human is being rethought constantly – and we can see how much is to be gained by a conversation across the disciplines; it is that enterprise we hope to begin with the College Commons in the coming year.

The call for proposals:

This call for proposals asks that even though you may initially locate your questions within your own discipline, you ask this question in such a way as to engage someone who approaches related questions from a very different perspective, using the tools of another discipline. As a result, your proposal should lift you out of the confines of any one discipline to encounter the questions of others and re-situate your own ideas. As we have done in the past, we are inviting preliminary proposals which the College Commons committee will read, exchange, and help expand further into truly inter-disciplinary conversations, as we help you expand your network of colleagues in diverse departments. We are particularly keen to see proposals in which scientists and non-scientists expand each other’s horizons. We welcome ideas that are fully formulated, but we also encourage people to write to us in the preliminary stages of curiosity and in this spirit of collaboration.

We encourage proposals which create structures in which a group of faculty from very different disciplines meet to broaden each other’s horizons, and do so in a way which invites other faculty members, as well as students (and perhaps even a broader community) to share in this “merging of horizons.” Mechanisms for this include conversations with colleagues and visitors in forums such as seminars, lectures which invite debate and discussion, roundtables and which offer ideas for continuing the conversation beyond the semester or so in which College Commons provides explicit financial support.

We would also like to see “uncommon conversations” permeate the education that the College offers, so that students not only get a firm grounding within their chosen discipline, but also come to see how that can be enriched by reaching out across the disciplines. We thus also invite proposals that focus on the experience of these ideas within the classroom and in other connections with graduate students, undergraduate students, and the larger USC community. For this purpose, you may submit a proposal for a new course, an additional element to be introduced into an existing course, or a collaboration with faculty offering parallel courses in another department; you may also propose reading groups and other activities designed for graduate or undergraduate students, making clear what your proposal adds to a course or project you could offer within the existing structure of your home department.

Any college faculty member (working alone or in groups – but in any case with new ideas on how to work across disciplinary boundaries), including non-tenure track and clinical faculty, academic department, research center, or institute may submit a proposal. All we ask is that your proposal say not only why the proposed event will matter to those who already care about the questions it raises, but how it will spark the imagination of others within our community who might not even know that this question exists. We look forward to these exciting, on-going conversations.

Examples of possible activities include:

- seminars, colloquia, visiting speakers, mini-conferences
- presentations and discussions of faculty work in progress linked to a shared theme or question
- events connected to laboratories, local museums and institutions; performances and exhibitions
- proposals for team-taught courses or linked courses taught in collaboration by faculty from two departments
- proposals for micro-seminars and sophomore seminars
- proposals to develop research modules within existing courses
- graduate seminars and research collaboration

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. The committee will be open to more unexpected forms of intellectual exchange.

Deadlines and details:

Each proposal should address the following:

- A description of the proposed activity
- Who is proposing this activity; whom will it interest and attract; how will it advance a larger exchange of ideas in the College?
- How will the proposing faculty build a conversation that truly cuts across diverse disciplines; who can be expected to attend and why?
- What expenses do you anticipate?

We ask that faculty who intend to submit proposals send a preliminary description of their proposed program by **November 1, 2009** to Professor Hilary Schor (schor@college.usc.edu). Your initial proposal need be no longer than a page or so, with some words about your own relevant expertise and interests but focused on three questions: what conversation would you like to be having with your College colleagues; how will the program or activity you propose promote and encourage that conversation; and whom have you identified (or what sort of person do you want the Committee to help you identify) who comes from a very different discipline, but who shares your excitement about answering the question that is at the heart of your proposal? The committee will then hold follow

up meetings and discussions with proposers to help focus and further develop the proposals, and where appropriate, bring groups of like-minded faculty together in conversation. Final proposals are due by **February 15, 2010**; they should be no longer than 1,000 words, with a 100 word abstract, a budget, and a one paragraph biography for each proposer. Submissions should be made via a single Word document or PDF file. Decisions will be announced in the Spring semester.

We encourage you to begin speaking with your friends or colleagues, perhaps even to seek out some faculty members you don't yet know personally, and to imagine creatively and even audaciously. We also encourage you to seek out the members of the faculty Steering Committee. We are eager to work with our colleagues to create programs that reflect our collective curiosity and sense of wonder, and look forward to hearing from you.

Steering Committee for College Commons:

Hilary Schor, Chair (English and Law)
Michael Arbib (Biology and Computer Science)
David Bottjer (Earth Sciences)
Werner Dappen (Physics and Astronomy)
Jo Ann Farver (Psychology)
Clifford Johnson (Physics and Astronomy)
Natania Meeker (French & Italian and Comparative Literature)
Karen Pinkus (French & Italian and Comparative Literature)
Greg Thalmann (Classics and Comparative Literature)