This discussion paper was prepared to stimulate discussion on how we might encourage the creation of more interdisciplinary programs, degrees, and endeavors at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. Presumably there is some larger academic goal or mission that we are attempting to serve by promoting new interdisciplinary initiatives. Our recently adopted strategic plan emphasizes three core values in the mission statement: leadership, excellence, and innovation. The strategic plan also emphasizes the importance of the connections between research and other activities on campus. The new standards of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) also emphasize the importance of becoming a “self learning institution” and the core commitments to both “institutional capacity” and “commitment to educational effectiveness.” The new standards also encourage the reinforcement of a “climate of inquiry throughout the institution,” reflecting the “input of stakeholders” as well as an understanding of both learning and how to measure and assess educational outcomes over time. Our strategic plan and the associated process has helped to define a new course for our campus, tempered both by the framework for accreditation established by WASC and also by other constraints which include limited resources, bureaucratic processes, and resistance to change. The desire to maintain the status quo is often understandable. Many of our programs have achieved excellence. Why disrupt the progress and good work in research, teaching and public service with an assumption that change is for the better?

Nicholas Negroponte, one of co-founders of the MIT Media Lab, recently published a short piece entitle, “Creating a Culture of Ideas” in which he points out that “innovation is inefficient. More often than not it is undisciplined, contrarian, and iconoclastic; and it nourishes itself with confusion and contradiction.” He argues for the importance of diversity, pointing out that “common and deep-seated beliefs, widespread norms, and behavior and performance standards are the enemies of new ideas.” He maintains that “our biggest challenge in stimulating a creative culture is finding ways to encourage multiple points of view” and that the antidote to “canalization and compartmentalization is being interdisciplinary.” He suggests that “maximizing the differences in backgrounds, cultures, ages, and like will increase the likelihood that the results will not be what we had imagined.” Negroponte argues that a culture of ideas is created in an environment that encourages risk-taking as well as openness and idea sharing.

The point of this discussion is that our efforts to encourage more interdisciplinary efforts at Manoa should be first seen within the broader context of promoting innovation and creating a culture of ideas.
While it is useful to examine the experience of places such as MIT, we also have our own history of experiments, efforts, and programs designed to promote more interdisciplinary interaction here at Manoa. These include the creation of interdisciplinary departments and programs such as urban and regional planning and women’s studies, the creation of interdisciplinary schools such as the School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Studies and School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology, and the emergence of cross-cutting programs such as Selected Studies and the Honors program. Often there are faculty who have been appointed to joint positions. There have also been efforts to link courses across departments and schools through the creation of Learning Communities. One strategy for promoting more interdisciplinary efforts would involve investing more resources in these departments, programs, and units which are themselves interdisciplinary in nature.

Another strategy involves the use of seed funding. The second year of the 4-4-4 plan (which involved the imposition of a 4 percent restriction which was pooled into a central fund) involved reallocating resources towards new interdisciplinary initiatives. Interesting collaborations such as the Hui Konohiki project as well as others which involved new connections between colleges and programs emerged.

One the apparent challenges to the creation of new interdisciplinary degrees and credentials involves the problem of degree proliferation. With 92 bachelor’s, 91 master’s and 58 doctorates, we also need to consider the potential for consolidating some degrees and eliminating others before merely adding to the list of credentials offered at Manoa. Of course this needs to be done in systematic and coherent process, consistent with both Board of Regents policies and established faculty review procedures.

Where do we go from here? Clearly there is need to promote a culture of ideas and to encourage new, innovative collaborations across traditional disciplines. At the same time, we also need to ensure that our core disciplines are also strengthened and revitalized. Disciplinary knowledge is critical to the sustenance of interdisciplinary endeavors. In our quest to promote innovation across the campus, let us not forget that innovation and new ideas also sprout and grow within existing departments and units.

It seems that there are three strategies that might be appropriate for Manoa to consider.

*The creation of University Professorships.* Rather than appoint faculty to one or two departments, we might consider the creation of an interdisciplinary “University Professorship” in which the explicit role would be to connect students and faculty across multiple disciplines.

*Strategic Alliances with Industry and the Business Community.* Much of the preceding discussion focused on the internal workings of the university. A large public research institution such as ours must also be responsive to economic and social needs. As such, another strategy for promoting new interdisciplinary efforts involve linking diverse academic units to sectors and companies interested in innovation.
Academic Incubator Initiative. Using the model of a business incubator, Manoa might create a new entity, perhaps within the Chancellor’s office, involving members of the senior management team, which will review, support, and facilitate the implementation of new interdisciplinary initiatives. Ultimately these projects or programs will be housed within academic units, but in order to get them started, evaluated, and capitalized, it may be necessary to create some type of new environment which encourages openness, risk-taking, innovation, excellence and leadership.