

## Interdisciplinarity: A Major Issue

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*Interdisciplinary majors are a growing feature of the undergraduate university (Robles, 1998). Their widespread popularity should be of interest to both professional academics and student affairs professionals. These programs present unique opportunities to foster engagement across difference and to encourage a critically reflective learning approach, a style that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the American College Personnel Association (2004) all advocate. While highlighting the challenges and opportunities of interdisciplinary programs, these authors, who graduated with bachelor's degrees in interdisciplinary majors, will argue that these programs provide important opportunities for bridging gaps between the academic and student affairs spheres of university life.*

Modern Studies, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Political and Social Thought are all examples of the growing numbers of interdisciplinary majors that transcend traditional disciplinary curricula. Interdisciplinary majors are unique in that they entail the joining of two or more disciplines to provide cohesive curricula or academic endeavors for students (Robles, 1998). Pedagogical models for these majors involve a number of collaborative approaches. Team-teaching, shared curriculum development, and encouragement of student-initiated planning are all elements of interdisciplinary majors that contribute to their collaborative nature. The authors experienced a number of these approaches while pursuing interdisciplinary studies.

These programs, which involve elements of cross-campus collaboration, student engagement in the academic process, and campus community-building, create many challenges and opportunities for colleges and universities. The opportunities interdisciplinary programs provide can encourage institutional progress. These programs fulfill institutional needs identified by many academic and student affairs organizations—they allow for student engagement in the learning process

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and critical reflection on learning. They also foster engagement across difference in higher education, including across faculty, student, and functional areas (i.e., academic and student affairs). Additionally, they encourage an in-class focus on diversity and promote a style of learning that appeals to a diverse group of students. At the same time, however, these programs create challenges—how to achieve excellence, avoid dabbling, and establish a responsible managing party. Despite the need for continued development of interdisciplinary programs, they meet the goals of both academic and student affairs professionals and, therefore, provide a potential method for bridging the gap that often separates the two.

### Methods

Having experienced interdisciplinary majors first hand and now both pursuing the academic and student affairs fields, we evaluate here the opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary majors. We highlight ways in which these opportunities and challenges provide potential areas for the collaboration of academic and student affairs professionals. The theme of this edition of *The Vermont Connection, The Common in Community: Engaging Across Difference in Higher Education*, encouraged us to reflect on our experiences as students within interdisciplinary programs. These experiences provided a unique academic opportunity for students and professionals alike to engage across difference. Both authors also blended interdisciplinary study with campus leadership. These experiences gave the authors a sense of the bridges that interdisciplinary programs can help to build between academic and student affairs professionals. Yet, interdisciplinary programs also create challenges common in the bureaucratic and departmental environments of a university. We provide examples from our own programs in making our arguments, and we are familiar with a variety of interdisciplinary programs, each with different structures, guidelines, policies, and cultures. The literature on the field of interdisciplinary study grounds our writing.

### The Opportunities

#### *Fulfilling Established Needs*

Interdisciplinary programs have a unique role to play in achieving the vision of student learning that both academic and student affairs organizations have identified on campuses. In their publication *Greater Expectations*, The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2002) poses the question, “What should students be learning in college?” (The Learning Students Need for the 21st Century, para. 1). Using a philosophy of education that it calls *liberal education*, AAC&U answers this question, saying that all students should be prepared as intentional learners. Such learners are “empowered through intellectual and practical skills,” “informed by knowledge and ways of knowing,” and “responsible for personal actions and civic values” (The Learning Students Need for the 21st

Century).

Similarly, Gwendolyn Dungy (2004), the Executive Director of the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), wrote of the growing need in the late 1990s for a unified document of direction for the field of student affairs. With developing emphasis on assessment and the measure of learning outcomes and with a realization that the National Survey for Student Engagement measured student engagement in ways not purely related to student affairs, Dungy and others sought to create a document that would ground the work of student affairs in a current context and give guidance for the collaboration of faculty and student affairs professionals. The ensuing document, *Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA & American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2004), explores current trends and argues for the integration of academic and personal development to guide the work of both faculty and student affairs professionals. In response to a multifaceted student life, NASPA and ACPA call for *transformative education* (p. 8). This type of education, similar to *Greater Expectation's* liberal education, seeks to place students' "reflective processes at the core of the learning experience and asks the student to evaluate both new information and the frames of reference through which the information acquires meaning" (p. 9). Like AAC&U, NASPA and ACPA provide their field with a framework for incorporating student development with learning and intellectual development.

An answer to the call for both liberal and transformative education, interdisciplinary majors can provide opportunities for reflective and interactive learning and campus collaboration. These opportunities, therefore, are ones that stakeholders in higher education from across the nation are seeking. They provide both a deep level of learning in which the student has a voice and a method for campus collaboration that seems to be in great need at many institutions.

### *Student Learning*

Interdisciplinary programs provide a number of opportunities for innovative student learning that can benefit students as learners and as members of a broader community. Through these programs, students are able to explore different ways of knowing. As they seek knowledge in interdisciplinary majors, they are encouraged to evaluate the ways in which, and the disciplines through which, they attain knowledge. Students, along with faculty, select courses from many disciplines and use a variety of media to explore topics. Students, therefore, are able to evaluate not only gained knowledge but also the method of gaining knowledge. For example, within our own programs, we both used a variety of media to approach learning. From film to primary philosophy texts, from art to literature, from psychological theories to poetry, many genres became lenses through which we viewed a particular issue. In one of our programs, photographs became a textbook for examining racism in the South in the early 1900s. Nobel Prize winning drama sparked discussion

on the ambiguous legacy of colonialism in Africa. The use of these many media in one classroom or the ability to explore different media through multiple classes provides students with the opportunity to reflect not only on the subject being learned but also on the way the subject is learned—learning becomes holistic in an interdisciplinary classroom. Students not only learn what professors present, but they also reflect upon their own learning as they evaluate how and why the professor presented the material in such a way. For such learning to best occur, both classroom professors and student affairs professionals should guide this reflection process, asking students not only what they have learned but how.

This sort of learning brings with it the moral and cognitive development that student affairs professionals seek to nurture in students, particularly the values of multicultural competence in understanding and valuing cultures and communities. Students in one author's class explored the commentary of Romare Bearden's artwork on race, jazz, and the city in the 20th century. They engaged in a discussion around the unique portrayal of racial oppression through the eyes of the artist. The same class also visited the campus museum for lessons on pieces of art displayed. In another author's class, the plays of Wole Soyinka provided a compelling look at African history that enhanced the viewer's ability to understand events. These opportunities, which allow students to learn *how* to learn, may lend themselves to student affairs programming. Some programming ideas might include events focused on the multiple narratives, views, and stories of a community or culture, or events on different scientific approaches to problems, their potential consequences, and how engineers choose the approach based on those consequences.

Interdisciplinary programs not only encourage holistic learning but they also provide a reflective and interactive component to crafting a plan of study. Students participate in selecting courses that complete a cohesive curriculum. While they operate within certain program guidelines (such as a certain number of classes in a particular area or a certain number of upper level classes), students are able to choose courses and disciplines that best fit their academic pursuits. For example, a student might select classes in literature, politics, psychology and even science to construct a cohesive major in gender studies. In some instances, experiences outside the traditional classroom may also qualify as learning. A student studying bioethics might find that working in a hospital raises issues that relate to coursework. This experiential learning could, in many cases, be pursued as academic credit and could inform in-class reflection and future research projects. Thus, interdisciplinary programs provide students with an opportunity to share responsibility in learning and crafting their desired course of study.

This taking of personal responsibility for curriculum development further nurtures the kind of engaged, active student leaders whom student affairs professionals work to develop. In fact, many student affairs offices provide leadership development

programs, workshops, and retreats that encourage personal skills such as self-awareness, moral decision-making, multicultural competence, and priority setting. Student affairs professionals might also add to these developmental programs a component that encourages students to reflect on how their pursuit of course work, selection of classes, and development of curricula relate to their own priorities, values, and interests outside of the classroom. These administrators could help to nurture reflective interdisciplinary students through these kinds of programs. Furthermore, by developing their own curricula, students can combine their co-curricular interests through campus programming. With support of student affairs professionals, students can take what they learn in an interdisciplinary classroom and create programs that bring academics into student life. One example might be the showing of a TV-series and a follow-up dialogue about how the values of a society are portrayed, influenced, or opposed in pop-culture.

### *Collaboration Across Difference*

In addition to providing a new pedagogy for student learning, interdisciplinary majors also encourage collaboration across campus in a number of ways. The power of this collaboration has a hold on today's universities. For example, President Daniel Mark Fogel (2006) of the University of Vermont recently commented:

To advance and realize [Vermont's] vision of being the nation's premier small public research university, it must find ways to promote collaborative interdisciplinary research . . . to a degree that is rarely if ever achieved in our siloed institutions of higher education. (para. 5)

Fogel highlights that to be a cutting-edge academic institution, the university must champion programs that encourage thought which spans disciplines and academic relationships which span departments. In universities where the "silos" of discipline remain ever intact, interdisciplinary programs provide a welcome venue for partnerships.

One type of partnership interdisciplinary majors encourage is faculty collaboration across disciplines. In an environment where they narrowly specialize in their departments (Boyer, 1990; Clark, 1963), faculty members rarely have the chance to pursue joint learning and teaching. In fact, faculty culture is known for its individuality in research and teaching (Clark). Therefore, interdisciplinary programs provide an opportunity for faculty to work together on their specialties across disciplines. For example, in a capstone course offered through the American Studies program at the University of Virginia, a Civil War historian and a scholar of Civil War literature combined to teach an interdisciplinary course on the war. Students viewed history not just through a textbook but also through primary sources and through cultural expressions. Faculty members were able to combine their disciplines in the classroom, crafting new material and ways of learning in the process.

Interdisciplinary programs can also encourage student collaboration across disciplines. In one of the author's programs, students came together who were studying subjects as varied as educational policy (effects of No Child Left Behind on schools of different socioeconomic levels), gender issues (problems and methods of adjudication of sexual assault on college campuses), and the changing, elusive nature of the American Dream. The commonality that tied these interests together was the grounding core coursework in political and social thought. These students had the opportunity not only to learn from faculty in different disciplines; they also had the opportunity to learn from each other. They were able to engage in common seminar discussions, help in refining individual research projects, and respond to student research as it progressed.

These programs can also provide the potential for collaboration not just across disciplines but also across undergraduate colleges (e.g., Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Architecture, Business, and others). For example, an engineering student might take ethics courses for a major in engineering and bioethics. A student studying architecture and urban planning could pursue classes in racial politics for a major that encompasses sociological aspects of urban planning. A student studying literature might also pursue business classes to examine the cross-sections of the commerce of publishing and the craft of writing. Thus, faculty and students would interact not just within their own school of sometimes similar disciplines (such as the liberal arts) but also with those from traditionally different disciplines. This sort of interaction could encourage new research, pedagogies, and institutional vitality.

In addition to cross-discipline interaction, interdisciplinary programs can provide unique opportunities for collaboration across functional areas, particularly between student affairs professionals and faculty members. These kinds of majors provide opportunities for unique student development on campus, such as focused residential communities, creative academic programming, and unique in-class speakers. This task of building collaborations between faculty and student affairs professionals will take active engagement from both sides, and from students, but if conceived correctly could provide important progress in building universities that better nurture student learning.

### *Diversity*

Interdisciplinary programs can also promote diversity on campus. By diversity, we do not mean the diversity of academic disciplines, which we have already discussed, but the diversity of individual identities. Interdisciplinary programs encourage the exploration of cross-sections of identity. Many programs, as the reader might notice from the titles of interdisciplinary majors that begin this article, provide a focused study of identities from religious belief, to sexuality, to race and ethnicity, to gender. These programs encourage cross-campus collaboration on these issues

of diversity that often resonate deeply with students, administrators, and faculty alike. These courses promote a multicultural competence that campuses strive to create for all in the community.

Not only do these programs provide an opportunity to study diversity in the classroom; they also encourage a type of approach to learning that appeals to a diverse group of students. Interdisciplinary programs encourage and nurture faculty and student interaction, student-initiated and creative projects, and student participation in learning. These majors, therefore, incorporate many of the pedagogical components that have been shown to appeal to students who have not been supported in historically predominately White classrooms (Hurtado, Milem, Clatyon-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Interdisciplinary majors have the potential to serve as models for multiculturally competent pedagogies. This potential can be of interest to student affairs professionals who make meeting the needs of diverse students one of their top priorities. They could collaborate with faculty to guide in-class lessons on multicultural competence, so that students not only look at diversity through an academic lens but also through a personal lens.

### The Challenges

Given the above analysis, interdisciplinary programs may seem the prescription for all that ails contemporary American higher education. While the authors agree that such programs have great potential to meet the academic and student affairs goals for contemporary universities, that potential will only be realized if administrators and faculty consider a number of challenges. If the following issues remain unaddressed, the interdisciplinary model risks unaccountable students, administrative fragmentation, and isolation from the broader university community.

#### *Ensuring Excellence and Accountability*

While the flexibility of interdisciplinary programs makes them attractive to many students, it can also become their greatest challenge. The demands made by particular departments of their traditional majors are designed to ensure a solid foundational education in the discipline and guide students through material essential to success in the field. In contrast, many interdisciplinary programs “liberate” undergraduates from traditional major requirements in the interest of course diversity. Foundational coursework is eschewed in favor of exotic sampling. While there is certainly much to be gained from such diverse exposure, it must be balanced against the need for direction in an educational plan. A related challenge is ensuring consistent work from students after they gain admission into selective interdisciplinary programs. Both authors knew students who exerted less effort after being admitted to interdisciplinary programs. This decline in work ethic is a threat both to the intellectual climate of a university and the need for upperclass leadership outside of the classroom.

Two solutions can make significant progress in ensuring excellence and accountability in interdisciplinary programs. First, the program should integrate a core curriculum with carefully guided independent coursework. A shared core curriculum gives the program director the opportunity to assign foundational texts in the field of study to students and has the twin benefit of building intellectual and personal bonds among students. This curricular core, likely in the form of a seminar, should be among the most challenging intellectual experiences students have at the university. It draws texts from across departments with the unified goal of building the intellectual exposure that will enable future research. The University of Virginia's program in Political and Social Thought combines classics of political thinking, like Aristotle, Kant, Marx, and Arendt, with the sociology of Orlando Patterson, the literature of Nadine Gordimer, and the relentless critique of Edward Said. In addition to this curricular core, program administrators should work closely with students to develop course lists that will provide the foundational knowledge necessary for future research. The program then becomes an opportunity to develop a truly rigorous personal curriculum rather than a mere license to directionless dabbling. If faculty and student affairs professionals work together, co-curricular leadership and engagement could provide a part of the core curricular requirements of interdisciplinary programs. Interdisciplinary faculty might encourage students to apply their co-curricular involvement with their in-class learning for a class project.

Second, a capstone project or thesis serves as an effective end goal for the interdisciplinary students' study and challenges them to integrate their broad coursework into a unified project worthy of academic consideration. Effective programs require that this project be undertaken with the advisement of a faculty member and with at least the initial approval of the program director. This final project allows students to develop personal and professional relationships with faculty members, challenges them to focus their interdisciplinary work on a concrete product, and requires a level of in depth reading and writing that ensures the interdisciplinary experience is more than intellectual window shopping. Final projects could take many different forms. One of us wrote an independent credit-bearing thesis. One of us pursued a common class with all cohort members on the history of modern art, which was a completely new topic to all; this class encouraged students to use already-acquired skills from different disciplines to engage in a new form of learning.

Such a capstone project also presents potential for the development of student affairs programming. Campus thesis conferences or undergraduate research symposiums could enrich the broader university community and could encourage distinct interdisciplinary programs to interact as students conclude their research. Additionally, faculty and student affairs professionals could work together to encourage interdisciplinary students to consider projects that benefit the university community.



For example, one of our classmates studied campus policies on adjudicating sexual assault as she studied feminism in the United States. She worked with both faculty and a dean of students as she made suggestions for her campus.

*Funding and Managing Programs Beyond Departments*

A further challenge facing interdisciplinary major programs is administration and governance. The academic structure of the modern university centers on its departments or specialization (Boyer, 1990; Clark, 1963). Interdisciplinary programs exist specifically to broaden that departmental structure, a happy fact that brings with it a series of administrative challenges. Who will fund the program? Will faculty members be allowed to teach outside of their departments? Who will make decisions regarding curricular development? Who will review professor performance and ensure quality administration for students?

While interdisciplinary programs thrive by pushing departmental boundaries, these questions reveal the extent to which the departmental structure of the university is essential to their success. Without the financial and workload support from one or more academic departments, a viable program cannot be built. Even if outside funding could essentially build an autonomous interdisciplinary department, the program's director would need cooperation from colleagues in other departments to secure advisors for student theses and willing partners for the program's success in attracting students.

When such programs are successfully integrated into the departmental structure of the university, this challenge can become one of the greatest strengths of these programs. Faculty from across disciplines can come into regular contact with one another and engage intellectually by sharing advising responsibilities. Departments unable to launch new programs alone can pool funds to bring about interdisciplinary success. While there will be inherent political and ego-management issues in such a process, they are certainly not insurmountable for the skilled administrator. If, as Ernest Boyer (1990) says, contemporary universities should make "connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way" (p. 18), the success of these programs can be a key feature improving higher education in the United States today. Reduction of fragmentation and an increase in coalition building, we believe, would also foster an environment in which student affairs and academic bridges would be more easily developed.

*Serving the Broader University*

Given the widespread proliferation of interdisciplinary major programs and their tendency to attract already academically engaged students, forward-thinking college officials of mid- to large-sized universities and colleges must address one other concern: weakening the university as a whole while serving some students excep-

tionally well. If a dozen programs pull 20 students each into isolated academic environments in which students take classes not available to the general student population, the broader educational mission of the university may suffer. With this in mind, administrators must weigh not only the substantive merits of the program under consideration but also the total number of such programs already in existence in the university. Further consideration must be given to the effect that proliferating specialized interdisciplinary programs has on university unity. At their best, such programs encourage unity by promoting inter-departmental cooperation. At their worst, they further academic atomization through extreme specialization.

The close supervision of interdisciplinary students as they develop their custom curriculum is one way to address this concern. Students should be required to pursue upper-level seminars in related university departments and held accountable for their performance in those environments. When major grade point averages (GPAs) are calculated, it is important to include courses taken from the menu of interdisciplinary options in addition to whatever core curriculum all students in the program share. Students will take classes within departments seriously, draw more from those academic environments, and benefit the university as a whole in the process. One issue that deserves further study is the practice of freezing a GPA after admission to highly selective programs. Some selective interdisciplinary programs freeze students' GPAs at their pre-admission levels; future academic evaluation rests only on performance within the major program. While program members argue that such a freeze is necessary to allow students to focus entirely on their selected major, there is the undeniable risk of students neglecting their academic commitments in the broader university community when not held accountable through grading.

Student affairs professionals have a role to play as well in the integration of interdisciplinary majors into the broader university. The research conducted by students in these programs is often provocative and interesting and could be shared and debated through publications and the kinds of public research forums described above. Such forums can be of significant value not only in integrating programs into the university but also in building bonds between students in different interdisciplinary programs. Additional programming centered on learning through various media (especially stage, film, and music) can present further opportunities for program development that brings these academic majors into contact with the broader student body.

### Conclusion

Interdisciplinary majors provide great opportunities to improve the academic and student life environment of America's universities. While certain challenges must

be managed, when properly conceived, interdisciplinary programs can challenge students and engage faculty and administrators. Students can be informed by knowledge and ways of knowing and learn to evaluate both new information and the frames of reference through which the information acquires meaning. In the process, university professionals can make real progress in meeting the established goals of the AAC&U's liberal education and NASPA and ACPA's transformative education. Such students could learn much from each other and benefit the university as a whole. The diversity of the university becomes a strength and provides an opportunity for intellectual and programmatic engagement across difference. By developing these programs to capitalize on the strength of diversity, faculty and administrators can take advantage of a major opportunity.

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