Interdisciplinary Studies

FEATURED TOPIC

IN TODAY'S competitive college market, "interdisciplinary studies" are a major selling point for colleges and universities. These once marginal sites for innovative scholarship are now prominently displayed in brochures and Web pages, and they are viewed as necessary for attracting the best students. A Google search for "interdisciplinary major" turns up over six million results that reflect a wide sampling of programs, ranging from fully funded and autonomous departments to loose conglomerates of interested faculty. Johns Hopkins University has an interdisciplinary graduate program in the humanities, for example, and the Claremont Graduate School offers a doctorate in cultural studies. There are interdisciplinary programs in business schools as well as in the sciences. At one level, it is a testament to the success and viability of the many interdisciplinary departments, programs, and centers that they have gained institutional status. One could even claim that the twenty-first-century university marks the ascension of interdisciplinarity as the dominant educational paradigm.

And yet, on closer examination, it is apparent that the academic structure and place of the majority of these programs, departments, and centers are not substantially different from the academic disciplines, departments, and divisions they were originally designed to challenge. When considered within the broader context of the business of education in the twenty-first century, this state of affairs may be more troubling and Faustian than it appears. In *The University in Ruins* (1997), Bill Readings argues that liberal arts education—and the university in general—has undergone a profound change in its mission and identity as it has been transformed from a site designed to foster a unified national culture into a corporate-style service industry selling a vacuous and indefinable notion of "excellence." The shift to university-as-service-industry has led to a need for increased specialization to provide specific marketable skills or sites of interests that can attract the student/customer. This most cynical reading sees institutional support for interdisciplinary studies as an attempt to create and foster niche markets. Furthermore, in striking this deal, interdisciplinary studies became complicit, if not responsible, for the fragmentation of the university into a series of localized specializations isolated from, and in competition with, one another to attract niche customers/students. Thus the interdisciplinary departments, programs, and centers found willing partners but at a price: their interdisciplinarity. Far from marking the dawn of an interdisciplinary era, this pact with the devil has marked the end of real interdisciplinarity.

Is the very success of interdisciplinary studies leading to its demise?

Is the very success of interdisciplinary studies leading to its demise? And are they displacing and discrediting the traditional disciplines along the way? Not yet, but these are real and pressing possibilities. Then again, if Readings's diagnosis of the contemporary university system is correct, one might be tempted to regard these questions as moot and admit defeat in the face of a higher educational system rendered ineffective and obsolete by current political and market forces. The alternative is to take the threat seriously and use these questions as a springboard to think through the past, present, and future of interdisciplinary studies in an attempt to find productive and substantive ways for it to work and flourish within the current university system. This is what I propose to do.

The professionalization of interdisciplinary studies

Readings's diagnosis takes account of the place of the university in a globalized economy, but it does not take sufficient account of the profound disconnect between the market-driven

ETHAN KLEINBERG *is associate professor of history and letters, and director of the College of Letters, at Wesleyan University.* *The author thanks Michael Roth and Michael Printy for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.*

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at a Crossroads

ETHAN KLEINBERG

Wesleyan University

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conditions of the university and the ideals of the faculty who teach in it. Faust may have been given a straight offer, but the institutionalization of interdisciplinary studies was paved with good intentions. The project of interdisciplinary collaboration, research, and teaching did not set out to replicate the established disciplines and departments but to reimagine them.

It is essential that interdisciplinary programs, centers, and departments resist the temptation of total autonomy and independence

In December 1958, Wesleyan University President Victor Butterfield and the university's educational policy committee called for doing away entirely with the traditional departmental structure of the American university system. They proposed instead to reorganize Wesleyan University into a collection of semi-autonomous interdisciplinary colleges and divisions. The proposal was presented in response to the perception that the existing educational structure had led to an intellectual malaise and the hope that this interdisciplinary reorganization would revitalize the curriculum, the faculty, and the students. The goals were idealistic and noble; to paraphrase Butterfield in *The College Plan in Perspective*, the plan would break through the artificial barriers of specialized subjects and instead allow these various fields (such as literature, philosophy, art, and science) to "shed light" on one another so as to "extend the body of knowledge and ideas common to teachers and students alike." This, in turn, would force established scholars and teachers to rethink their own approaches and assumptions. Perhaps most striking is that this plan sought to destabilize the authority of the faculty and the disciplines themselves by asking instructors to move away from disciplinary pronouncements based on past success and formulations and, instead, to extend themselves beyond the areas of their authority and expertise in pursuit of innovation. For its time, it was a radical plan. Indeed, it was so radical that it was not implemented. Wesleyan was not reorganized, although in 1959 it did create three interdisciplinary teaching colleges: the College of Letters, the College of Social Studies, and the College of Quantitative Studies—of which the first two are still active.

In the decades that followed, the proliferation of interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching served as a key factor in empowering previously marginalized subjects through the creation of women's studies, African American studies, and others. These programs brought together scholars from disparate fields who shared a common goal and who sought to challenge the existing disciplines that had neglected their fields of interest. But it is also true that as these previously marginalized fields grew and legitimized themselves through sound scholarship, curriculum, and teaching, they took on the characteristics of the traditional disciplines they were designed to challenge. Many of these fields now boast journals, monograph series at university presses, and professional associations with annual meetings. Some have control of, or a say in, the hiring and tenuring of faculty and thus have developed institutional networks of senior scholars who serve as referees. These are all developments that mirror the preexisting structure. This is not surprising, considering the need for institutional support, in terms of both funding and staffing, and the ways this support appeared to promote the project of interdisciplinary work and teaching. The professionalization of interdisciplinary studies was also necessary to blunt criticism from the more traditional disciplines and departments that interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching lacked sufficient disciplinary depth, that they could not be sufficiently rigorous, and that there would be no basis upon which to judge the quality of the scholarship and teaching.

Interdisciplinarity endangered

Thus interdisciplinary studies programs, departments, and centers slowly entered into the Faustian bargain that has given interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching institutional status but has brought it to a crossroads. One road leads to Readings's "university in ruins." The danger is that interdisciplinary programs themselves are becoming disciplines. This is not to suggest that there is anything inherently wrong with the traditional disciplines, Butterfield's observations notwithstanding. It is instead to suggest that interdisciplinary programs are now in a position to make authoritative pronouncements based on substantive and canonical bodies of work and, like the traditional disciplines they sought to challenge, are losing the flexibility, spontaneity,

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and open-minded approach that characterized their development. Moreover, as these programs have become more self-assured and independent, often as the result of institutional support, they have become less beholden to the various disciplines that once defined their interdisciplinarity. If this trend continues, then the age of interdisciplinarity will soon be over and "interdisciplinary" will become just another buzzword. This development would dovetail into the creation of niche markets where each "interdisciplinary" site—American studies, Asian studies, cultural studies, European studies, gender studies—becomes its own discipline and erects "artificial barriers" of "specialized subjects" that wall them off from other disciplines.

There is another danger down this road: dilettantism. Because these departments, programs, and centers were designed to be interdisciplinary, they were beholden to the disciplines that contributed their faculty—even if those same scholars were hostile to, or frustrated with, their "home" disciplines. In effect, disciplinary and departmental affiliation was necessary to give these scholars and programs methodological credibility. After a recent conference of the Cultural Studies Association, Jan Mieszkowski, the organizer of a seminar on the status of economic thought in the contemporary humanities, lamented that "rather than reaping the benefits of some magical polymorphic conglomeration of methods and ideals drawn from many fields, we were left with no objects of inquiry and no way to proceed" (pers. comm.). Cut loose from the disciplines and departments that once anchored the programs, both in the sense of keeping them from drifting but also in the sense of weighing them down, what is left to keep interdisciplinary studies from becoming superficial? Have they developed a sufficient and mature theoretical and practical scaffold to guide their students and their work? And if so, are they still interdisciplinary in any sense of the word, or do we again reach the conclusion that they are simply new disciplines? Either the institutional emphasis on and support of superficial teaching and scholarship has compromised the integrity of the university by drawing resources away from traditional disciplines, or interdisciplinary niches have supplanted and replaced the traditional disciplines in terms of utility.

Fostered by the material reality of the current university system and the choices of the faculty members who run them, interdisciplinary programs, departments, and centers are in danger. The worst-case scenario is a situation where the lofty ideals upon which interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching were founded are replaced by the worst tendencies of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity alike: a secluded, self-legitimizing, and backward-looking field that lacks the rigorous foundation, methodology, and autonomy of more traditional departments.

It is not inevitable that interdisciplinary programs will succumb to the dangers they now face, however; there is another road to follow. As noted, it is the strength of these programs that have led them to a crossroads. It is not too late for interdisciplinary programs, departments, and centers to draw upon their symbolic and actual capital and to blaze a new path, leading the rest of the university into the twenty-first century. This would have to be a path that eschews the market-driven morass surveyed by Readings and that, instead, navigates the university as a matrix of positive and reinforcing connections.

Julie Thompson Klein (2005, 78) has outlined key criteria needed to foster interdisciplinary work in a substantive fashion: "adequate economic and symbolic capital";

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"full-time appointments in an interdisciplinary program, center, or department"; "a secure location in the organizational hierarchy of the campus"; and "control of staffing." While these are essential requirements, the beauty and utility of interdisciplinary studies reside not in their institutional strength but, rather, in their protean nature and their ability to build bridges and make connections among the disciplines, across departments, and throughout the university. Thus, it is essential that interdisciplinary programs, centers, and departments resist the temptation of total autonomy and independence lest they become isolated fortresses each beholden to their own particular methodology, ideology, or canon. This temptation is often difficult to resist, especially as the promise of independent power can appear to serve as "payback" for past injustices or slights (real or perceived) received at the hands of the traditional disciplines. When an interdisciplinary department is "under siege" and pulls in from the rest of the university to rely solely on its core faculty, the teaching and discussion of the field is restricted to the indoctrinated few. The isolation soon leads to a sense of proprietary ownership and essentialism that short-circuits the interdisciplinary project.

Two models

If the intellectual goals of the interdisciplinary project remain greater than the desire for independence and control, interdisciplinarity can eschew the fragmentation and isolation of the market-driven niche majors while creating idea-driven connections throughout the university. Two models are particularly instructive. The first is the model of an interdisciplinary program based on a large, cohesive theme that spans multiple disciplines. Wesleyan University's College of Letters is built on such a model. Over three years, students in the College of Letters are required to take five colloquia that span from antiquity to the present. The content of the colloquia are great works of predominantly European literature, philosophy, and history, but there is no fixed canon. Furthermore, each colloquium is taught by two professors from different disciplines and perspectives. Thus, there is no single authority or approach

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for the students to imitate, and the larger theme of "great works"—itself always under question—creates a space where many disciplines intersect in conversation, argument, dissent, and even agreement. The goal is to destabilize authority and authoritative pronouncements—not to fall into relativism but, rather, to keep the ideas at play so as to create a space for dynamic discussion. In doing so, one necessarily cedes the authority inherent in the disciplines and embarks on new and often untried domains.

There is an aspect of amateurism in this sort of interdisciplinary work that is often troubling to the traditional disciplines, but this should not be confused with dilettantism. One cannot be expert in everything, and ideally it is the question of the informed amateur or the conflation of two disparate approaches that leads to creativity and fosters new and exciting research. The added benefit is that the student is involved in the project as an active participant judging myriad viable approaches and choosing the most appropriate one.

A second model is project-based and brings multiple disciplines together to address a specific issue or set of issues. A program such as "Science in Society" or "Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies" might fit this model where interested faculty from multiple disciplines are brought together in order to address a specific issue or set of issues and, therefore, the particular combination of disciplines is ephemeral. This protects the program from becoming another "discipline," while the importance of the project itself protects against dilettantism.

Both models focus on dialogue, exchange, and the infusion of new ideas, and accordingly, both rely on the traditional disciplines. In turn, the traditional disciplines are brought into contact with each other not only through the interaction of scholars and students in the interdisciplinary projects but also through the return of these scholars to their "home" disciplines, where they can share these new ideas and approaches. Such exchange occurs when faculty are discussing ideas instead of competing for funding. The success of interdisciplinary departments, programs, and centers requires institutional support, but it also requires internal self-restraint so that they do not end up as ersatz disciplines. Faust made his bargain for himself at the expense of others; we must avoid such selfishness.

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary departments, programs, and centers are poised to lead the university in a new direction, but to do this we need to make the right choices and follow the road of intellectual generosity rather than isolated self-interest. We need to guard against self-serving desires that may appear to promise intellectual autonomy and power but actually lead to isolation, fragmentation, and ultimately, the end of interdisciplinarity. We should work to usher in an era when interdisciplinary departments, programs, and centers do not supplant or replace the traditional disciplines but serve instead to create pathways and intersections, bringing faculty and students together for the common endeavor of intellectual exchange. The benefits will include the production of knowledge through innovative scholarship, the creation of working networks across the disciplines and departments throughout the university, and most important, the fostering of an informed and critical public. When no one discipline or method is privileged over another and all the disciplines are connected, students learn to be critical, syncretic, original thinkers who interrogate authority to find the best and most viable answers regardless of the question.

In the end, intellectual generosity is the antidote to Readings's diagnosis of a vacuous, market-driven university of competing interests. And at their best, interdisciplinary departments, programs, and centers embody and foster intellectual generosity. Interdisciplinary studies are at a crossroads, and it is up to us to choose the right road. □

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