

Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke: Context, Commitment, and Challenges

Office of the Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies, Duke University

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Introduction

It is a worthwhile exercise to go back in time 25 years and, starting with [Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Planning for the Nineties](#), trace Duke's vision for interdisciplinary studies through three strategic plans, all the while taking stock of how far we have come in implementing that vision. Crossing Boundaries set the stage for the commitment to a culture of intellectual innovation and collaboration, and in each of the subsequent strategic plans, we see the vision materialize at a new level of maturity, more and more firmly imbedded in the very fiber of the institution. [Making a Difference](#), which was completed in 2006, followed from a planning process that actively engaged the academic community. The process resulted in the building of an infrastructure for interdisciplinary scholarship, teaching, and practice that brought Duke's commitment to a new level.

The Vision

Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Planning for the Nineties (1988) was a report that was prepared, in part, for purposes of reaffirmation of accreditation by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It was viewed by then-President Brodie and then-Provost Griffiths as an opportunity to evaluate interdisciplinary activities at Duke in order to move that agenda forward. Indeed the observations and recommendations of the faculty committees culminated in a most significant outcome. In 1993, then-Provost Langford sent a memorandum to the deans and faculty stating:

"Following the recommendation of the 1988 University Self-Study, Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Planning for the Nineties, the Provost has created the Office of the Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Activities. That office is charged to facilitate the evaluation and administration of both new and existing interdisciplinary programs with the goal of minimizing institutional barriers to collaborative activity of faculty across the campus. Interdisciplinary activities under the jurisdiction of the VPIA currently include all units termed "Centers", "Programs", "Institutes", and "Sections" which have not already been associated administratively within a particular School."

The new Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Activities (a position then held by the Dean of the Graduate School) was also charged to administer the Provost's Common Fund, an important vehicle to this day for providing seed money for interdisciplinary activity across the University. In [Shaping Our Future: A Young University Faces a New Century](#) (1994), the importance of the Common Fund was acknowledged, and the tradition of interdisciplinary and cross-school collaboration was heralded as one of Duke's competitive advantages by then-President Keohane. The plan called for the fostering of joint degree programs and joint faculty appointments, and emphasized, among the goals for the Schools, to securely establish the School of the Environment. To quote: "The School of the Environment represents an opportunity for Duke to bring to bear resources to enhance multidisciplinary collaboration in teaching, research and problem solving that will make a lasting impact both educationally and socially." The commitment to increasing academic and administrative effectiveness in interdisciplinary teaching and research was underlined in 1998, when President Keohane and then-Provost Strobehn named English

Professor Cathy Davidson Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies, a position she held through academic year '05-'06 and to which her time was fully devoted.

By the time Duke's 2001 strategic plan Building on Excellence was released under the stewardship of then-President Keohane and Provost Lange, interdisciplinary programming that would require central coordination and support was an all-important focus. The academic plan was built around a series of major cross-departmental and cross-school intellectual initiatives that were seen as cornerstones to the attainment of planning goals, and as "shaped by, and shaping of, the undertakings of the schools". Furthermore, to support the implementation of the plan, central resources were made available to create greater presidential and provostial leverage in setting institutional priorities. Amplifying the successes of Building on Excellence, in 2006, Making a Difference: The Strategic Plan for Duke University, under the leadership of President Brodhead and Provost Lange, put forward a bold vision with a central role for interdisciplinary studies. The vision starts with the assumption that we have come to a time when the limits of our model of specialized knowledge production and transmission have become more apparent, and the need for new forms of knowledge increasingly clear:

"In this new order, the complexity of problems will be increasingly apparent. We already begin to understand, for instance, that every health issue has a pathological, genetic, and an environmental dimension, not to mention a psychological, a sociological, a legal, and a spiritual one as well; and that health care is a problem at once medical, cultural, economic, and policy-dependent in solution. In a world where challenges take this form, an educated person will need to be able to pull together and integrate disparate bodies of knowledge, and to do so not by some fixed formula teachable in advance but improvisationally, opportunistically, in response to changing arrays of facts and sources.

"To develop the skills of problem solving in many-sided and rapidly changing situations, the abstract mental exercises that have formed the staple of education as we have known it will need to be supplemented with the chance to encounter problems in their unabstracted, real-world forms, where the plurality of their dimensions and the specificity of their challenges can be fully grasped. Further, although mental independence and solitary reflection will be as important as ever, many issues will require the sharing or pooling of understanding, the bringing together of bodies of knowledge that no one person could possess alone. Working in teams will be as characteristic of the integrative regime of knowledge as working alone was of the regime of specialization; and learning how to supplement our understanding with that of others with different mental horizons will be increasingly essential."

Building the Interdisciplinary Infrastructure

The strategic planning process that produced Making a Difference recognized the importance of the contribution of the social sciences to an intellectual environment characterized by collaboration and the production of knowledge in the service of society. In one instantiation of this recognition, the transformation of the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy and the Department of Public Policy Studies into the Terry Sanford School of Public Policy broadened the reach of public policy studies at Duke. This change allows for a considerable expansion of the very distinguished Public Policy Studies faculty, and an intellectual and educational focus committing the new School to policy research and engagement in four carefully selected areas: environmental and energy policy, health policy, globalization, and social policy. With new resources and strategic foci, the new School in its embryonic stage has already demonstrated its potential to partner with other schools and University Institutes and Centers, and to serve as a catalyst for activities across the social sciences that bear on public policy

broadly defined. This potential will allow for the University to realize a response to some of the most critical challenges of our time.

Strategic hiring in Economics, Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science, as well as in Public Policy Studies, has also enhanced the interdisciplinary profile of the social sciences. It has produced a new wave of scholars who easily cross disciplinary boundaries, and have intellectual connections to one another that produce fertile ground for interdisciplinary scholarship. They are scholars who are diverse in regard to race, gender and ethnicity, and who are connected by a passion for socially relevant research and the most sophisticated use of social science methodology and data. To create shared resources to serve the needs of these and other faculty, and to harness their intellectual energy, there has been a significant investment in the growth of the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI). The SSRI provides the space and infrastructure for intellectual exchange and programming, and a high level of support in the collection and analysis of data and the securing and managing of external research funds. As one of Duke's seven signature University Institutes (UICs), the SSRI and its affiliated centers (e.g., in child and family policy and population research) have the authority to partner with Schools in the hiring of tenure-line faculty, and to independently hire off-track regular rank faculty to enhance their teaching and research missions. The partnering of the University Institutes and Schools more broadly is conspicuous in the hiring of many of our new faculty, with social science faculty in Arts and Sciences often having close ties with more than one Arts and Sciences department, with a variety of University Institutes, and with faculty with tenure homes in other Schools.

The commitment to grow the Social Science Research Institute was part of a broader commitment to nurture its better established cousins in the Franklin Humanities Institute (FHI), the Kenan Institute for Ethics (KIE), the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions (NI) and the Institute for Genome Sciences and Policy (IGSP), and to complete the group of seven signature University Institutes and their affiliated centers by establishing the Duke Global Health Institute (DGHI) and the Duke Institute for Brain Sciences (DIBS). In recent years, with the help of strategic investments by the central administration, each of these seven UICs has grown in their impact on the intellectual environment at Duke. What's more, as a group, they create a signature for Duke by elevating the visibility of sites of interdisciplinary scholarship, teaching, policy engagement and practice. The focus in these UICs on such areas of scholarship and education as global health inequalities, the social consequences of genetic differences, the demography of aging and fertility, neuropsychiatric disorders, the ethical culture of major societal institutions, human rights, civil rights, the protection of children and the protection of the earth's resources is a natural extension of the focus on interdisciplinary studies. Our University Institutes and Centers as a group have the ability to partner with the Schools to enhance Duke's vision of knowledge in the service of society and more broadly raise the profile of interdisciplinary studies at Duke. Perhaps one of the most innovative programs put in place recently is one to augment those collaborations. The Provost's Joint School-UIC Tenure/Tenure-Track Faculty Hiring Program has designated strategic funds over a nine year period for the joint hiring of faculty who work half time in one of the Institutes.

A critical aspect of the investment in the UICs has been the creation of a central administrative infrastructure that would promote program delivery and innovation, realize economies of scale, set standards of staff expertise and competence, provide close oversight for good stewardship of University resources and compliance with University regulations and standards, and establish a new financial model and metrics to guide investments. The Office of Interdisciplinary Program Management (OIPM) opened in February 2008 with the hiring of its Executive Director, who reports to the Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies and works closely with the Offices of the Executive Vice Provost and the Executive Vice Dean for Administration in the School of Medicine. A very challenging charge of this office

is the facilitation of collaboration between Duke Medicine and the Campus, something that is essential to the smooth functioning of three of the UICs who are jointly sponsored by the Provost and the School of Medicine (IGSP, DGHI, DIBS). One of the most difficult ongoing processes has been the establishment of a financial model that both allows for the sustainability of those UICs that meet strategic goals, and at the same time sets the appropriate incentives for mutual support between the School deans and UIC directors in promoting interdisciplinary studies.

Given the continuing growth in interdisciplinary research, the University recognizes the need for increased accountability not only from the signature University Institutes and their affiliated Centers (UICs reporting to the Provost), but also from School-based Centers whose oversight is now the responsibility of School deans. There are more than 60 interdisciplinary centers within Duke's ten schools, representing a diverse set of partnerships across the University. To ensure that the School-based Centers remain vibrant and engaging in interdisciplinary scholarship and education, current procedures for the chartering and review of these Centers are monitored by the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies.

Looking to the Future

Duke has already achieved national recognition for its accomplishments. The tripartite mission of scholarship, education, and policy/practice of the signature Institutes, the infrastructure and budgetary model to sustain and provide systematic oversight to them, the Institutes' ability to hire regular rank faculty, and the collaborations across the natural, social and behavioral sciences are all distinctive. And ongoing efforts on the ground to increase innovation in both undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary education, and build on the already considerable collaborative work of faculty around pressing societal problems promise even greater recognition for Duke. As we move forward, it is useful to be mindful of the lessons learned: First, the substantial involvement of faculty groups during the planning process, and the transparency of the process more generally, made the designation of signature University Institutes and Centers by the central administration an uncontested decision. Second, the focus by the Provost's Office on a set of strategic Institutes...on their management, their sustainability, their interaction with the Schools, and their collective profile...greatly enhanced the normative status and value placed on interdisciplinary scholarship, education and practice. Third, the timing of the transition to a School of Public Policy greatly enhanced the efforts to put interdisciplinary knowledge at the service of society. Finally, a true commitment to interdisciplinary studies changes how the University does business. Continuous innovation is required to incorporate interdisciplinary work into University administrative structures, practices, and culture in order to sustain an enduring influence of interdisciplinary studies on the work of the University.