Overcoming Common Barriers

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Interdisciplinary graduate programs face many challenges, which are relatively easy to enumerate. Identifying effective strategies to mitigate these challenges is more difficult, as many of these challenges are deeply embedded in the structure of the contemporary university. I will divide my discussion into two sections, one of which speaks to the challenges posed by subject-focused interdisciplinary programs (such as Public Policy, Bio-Medical Engineering or Computational Media Design) and another which speaks to the challenges that arise in individualized interdisciplinary programs, which bring together eclectic sets of disciplines appropriate to a student's specific project.

Subject-focused Interdisciplinary Programs
Fundamentally, subject-focused interdisciplinary graduate programs are perceived to be threatening to the well-being of the cognate disciplines from which they draw faculty supervisors and (potentially) students. For example, my home discipline of Political Science has experienced what many within the discipline see as fundamental existential threats from the emergence of interdisciplinary programs in International Relations, Strategic Studies and Public Policy. From the perspective of faculty members in disciplinary units, interdisciplinary programs enjoy the advantages of novelty, a more practical or problem-based approach, and, consequently, greater support from senior university administration and government.

From the perspective of disciplinary units, there are several specific ways in which interdisciplinary graduate programs may adversely affect them. This analysis presumes that faculty members are appointed to disciplinary units, not interdisciplinary programs. First, the supervisory capacity of faculty members is divided or allocated entirely to the new program; available funding for students may shift (or be perceived to be shifting) to the interdisciplinary program. This affects the capacity of the disciplinary program to accept students, and also presents a dilemma that the disciplinary unit is not given credit for the supervisory work of its members. The faculty members themselves may experience pressure from both the disciplinary and interdisciplinary program to accept students. Second, students who might otherwise have pursued disciplinary training may opt for the interdisciplinary competitor. Third, faculty members ineligible or unwilling to supervise in the interdisciplinary program perceive themselves to be less valued or of lower status than their interdisciplinary peers and consequently position themselves as 'defenders of the discipline.'

At best, administrators can attempt to mitigate these concerns, but are unlikely to banish them. Defenders of the discipline may be mollified by moves toward reciprocity in the allocation of resources. For example, interdisciplinary graduate programs not attached to an undergraduate program may fund their graduate students to serve as teaching assistants in the home disciplines of their supervisors, thereby strengthening the disciplinary undergraduate program and acknowledging the discipline's loss of its faculty members' supervisory capacity. When

interdisciplinary programs are particularly well-funded but ineligible to employ faculty members directly, they may be able to fund faculty positions in cognate disciplines, thereby strengthening both the interdisciplinary program and the cognate discipline. Even this might not be welcomed fully by the defenders of the discipline, who may resent the interdisciplinary program's ability to determine hiring priorities and influence the outcome of the hiring process itself. Certainly, universities can—and should—adjust their formulae for counting student numbers to take into account interdisciplinary supervision.

A common challenge in interdisciplinary programs (both subject-focused and individualized) is a clash of disciplinary norms for research and scholarship. The greater the intellectual or methodological span between the home disciplines, the greater the challenge. While two social sciences might be able to agree on methodology and epistemology, the same may not be true of a social science paired with a humanities discipline. When the sciences are brought together with social sciences or humanities, the challenge deepens further. These issues are best resolved through extensive discussion and establishment of common norms among faculty members supervising in the interdisciplinary program. Ironically, however, the very establishment of these norms moves the interdisciplinary program toward a form of "disciplinization" as it takes on the characteristics of a discipline (a set of shared norms governing methodology, epistemology and scholarship). It is not clear whether this should be seen as success, as interdisciplinarity is normalized, or as a failure, as the creative tension inherent in interdisciplinary research is extinguished.

Individualized Interdisciplinary Programs
Because they bring together eclectic combinations of disciplines suited to a single student's research interest, individualized interdisciplinary programs do not present the same existential challenge to disciplines as do their subject-focused counterparts.

A key challenge faced by individualized interdisciplinary programs is a tendency to conflate "interdisciplinary" with "undisciplined." In the absence of rigorous oversight, there is a danger that interdisciplinary programs become home to supervisors cast out by their home programs, or students unable to gain admission to existing graduate programs.

Because interdisciplinary programs demand that students master two or more disciplines and navigate the methodological and epistemological differences between them, these programs must be administered with great care, ensuring that only the best-prepared students be admitted, and that their supervisors mentor them extensively through the challenging path they have chosen. The Director of an individualized interdisciplinary program should be an experienced academic administrator equipped to mediate supervisory committee conflicts and provide extensive guidance to students and committees. Common student experiences, focused on the practice of interdisciplinarity, its associated methodologies and challenges, are also critical to ensuring the rigor of the graduate experience and the preparation of students.

Conclusion
The challenges of interdisciplinary graduate programs and research are many, and are not easily addressed through administrative solutions. The situation is not entirely gloomy, however. Increasingly, interdisciplinary research has "gone mainstream." Students enrolled in disciplinary

graduate programs are offered greater flexibility in selecting their courses, constructing supervisory committees with representation from more than one discipline, and pursuing research projects that transcend disciplinary boundaries. Arguably, this development has been largely organic, rather than driven by institutional arrangements or incentives. Simply put, as faculty members' research has become more interdisciplinary, they have become more accommodating of interdisciplinary graduate research, and barriers have, in many instances, melted away. At my institution, this gradual development has undermined the vitality of the individualized interdisciplinary program, as students with interdisciplinary projects have preferred to enroll in disciplinary graduate programs that accommodate interdisciplinary research, rather than opting for the formalized interdisciplinary route.