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Graduate and Professional Education Week Student Panel: "Interacting on Interdisciplinarity: Opportunities and Successes" March 1, 2007, 12:30—2:00PM, HUB 309

This was the inaugural meeting of graduate students involved in interdisciplinary work, including students from the Graduate School's interdisciplinary programs, IGERTs, and disciplinary departments.

The Agenda:

I. Session Introduction
   Melissa Austin, Associate Dean for Academic Programs, The Graduate School
   Maresi Nerad, Associate Dean, The Graduate School
II. Panel Introduction
III. Panel Discussion
   Creating Interdisciplinarity in a Disciplinary University
   Interdisciplinary Careers in and out of Academia
IV. Open Discussion

I. Session Introduction. Melissa Austin welcomed everyone. She explained the oversight of the Graduate School's 18 interdisciplinary programs, the history of the Network of Interdisciplinary Initiatives (NII), and pointed out the work done by the Committee on the Organization of Colleges and Schools (CSOC) on supporting and sustaining UW's interdisciplinary programs and initiatives. Since most of the work done so far has focused on faculty and research issues, it's time to bring students into the dialogue and hear their perspectives.

   Maresi Nerad gave background on the formation and 1995 establishment of IGERT Programs by the National Academy of Sciences. She pointed out that these programs are composed of faculty members from various departments/disciplines who design an interdisciplinary graduate program or a component of one. Team and collaborative teaching, research, and publication are typical of IGERT programs.

II. Panel Introduction. Sarah Starkweather started by asking everyone to introduce himself or herself. Participants included: Sarah Starkweather, Geography and Program for

Interdisciplinary Pedagogy (PIP); Anne Marie Laberge, Public Health Genetics; Sara Breslow, Anthropology and IGERT; Amanda Henck, ESS and IGERT; Frank Fani, Physics undergraduate; Jenny Dorman, CIDR; Jean Rogers, Graduate School Interdisciplinary Programs & NII; Andrea Munro, Chemistry & Nanotechnology IGERT; Erika Kreger, Graduate School Development; Brianna Keller, Center for Career Services; Dipika Nath, Women Studies; Greg Shelton, GTTL; David Canfield-Budde, Graduate School Academic Programs & NII; Matt Wilson, Geography; Lisa Thornhill, English.

III. Panel Discussion.

A. Creating Interdisciplinarity in a Disciplinary University.

The models of interdisciplinarity are very different between the humanities and the sciences.

One model in the sciences is Public Health Genetics, a "young" interdisciplinary program, with its fourth Ph.D. cohort. Students are struggling with finding their space within the field since this is the only program nationally. (One concern is where will they end up on the job market? Will they and their field be understood?) To help establish a presence and an identity, one student started a Public Health Genetics Society, a web site that one can join and discuss issues in the field. The students tend to be interdisciplinary in their training, combining courses from epidemiology, environmental health, biostatistics, pathobiology, health services, bioethics, social sciences, law, public policy, and health economics. But, faculty tend to come from single disciplines. So integration of knowledge can be slower; only one course so far is interdisciplinary in its content. But the students' projects really are interdisciplinary in nature, and faculty are highly motivated and involved, so the merging of disciplines happens with the students and their projects.

Students from the Multinational Collaborations on Challenges to the Environment IGERT spoke about their program model. It has few requirements: a course, a study abroad, and an internship. The requirements are on top of the requirements of a PhD program (similar to a research assistantship). The program was started with an idealistic model: gather people from various disciplines around environmental research and synergy will happen. What was discovered was that the fields are so disparate (anthropology, earth & space sciences, engineering, biology, etc.) that there needed to be more structure to facilitate communication and synergy between disciplines. They had to go back to the basics between disciplines and ask questions regarding basic disciplinary assumptions, values, and methodologies, such as: What is ecology? What is nature?

The Nanotechnology IGERT was created from yet a different model. Faculty from chemistry, physics, electrical engineering, bioengineering, and various fields came together to share in the use of leading edge equipment and to solve specific problems. Students in the Nanotechnology IGERT program are all from various disciplines, but to address various interdisciplinary research problems, they need to be able to communicate with those outside their discipline.

A course about teaching and learning interdisciplinarity was mentioned in which 16 faculty members from various disciplines were brought together to examine ways in which they use writing. It was discomforting to have one's basic assumptions questioned, so people tended to

be leery in the beginning. But this leeriness was overcome through repeated meetings; what was learned from that is it is important to 1) draw people to meetings that challenge their assumptions and 2) keep them there so that they can learn different approaches to research & pedagogy. Interdisciplinarity takes time—you can't just throw people in a room and expect it to happen.

In ID fields one needs to learn to explain assumptions and research problems to people not familiar with them—more so than people in disciplines do. Since more and more research is becoming interdisciplinary and since more and more academic institutions are seeing the benefit in faculty and students being able to explain their work to the media, this is an important skill to learn in graduate school. In some sense, ID programs can better prepare graduate students for being able to explain their work.

The Simpson Center has been a great resource for "creating spaces" for interdisciplinarity, particularly for those in the humanities. Dipika and Lisa have worked on creating a "Community Assistant" job position/concept (like Research Assistants, Teaching Assistants, etc.) that could work to connect grad students from different disciplines. The Simpson Center offers research clusters whereby students can apply for funding to examine interdisciplinary problems or create forums to learn from each other and brew ideas before the dissertation stage. These institutionally sanctioned spaces for seeding, supporting, and sustaining interdisciplinarity are appreciated and needed: more problem based institutes, projects, and certificate programs for students. Also, better communication about these would be helpful, such as a "match.com" for interdisciplinary work, so that individual students don't have to have these "interdisciplinary conversations" in their head. Further noted, more and more disciplines are so specialized that one can more easily find commonality with someone in a completely different discipline.

B. Interdisciplinary Careers In and Out of Academia

With the nanotechnology supplemental training it's hard to tell just how beneficial it will be in helping to get a job. There is a fair amount of interchange between fields, such as physics and chemistry, in the interdisciplinary area of nanotechnology. And if a product is involved, nanotechnological training is considered to be an asset for jobs in industry or government.

It's interesting to note that some graduates of ID programs have a degree in a particular discipline with the interdisciplinary training additional to this. Others such as those in Public Health Genetics are graduates of an interdisciplinary field. They will be required to establish a place for themselves by explaining what it is they do.

It was noted that such fields as Women Studies and Communications didn't exist at one time. Now they are considered disciplines. In women studies, however, there is concern about how the graduates will do on the job market. Currently the faculty teaching in the women studies department tend to come from particular disciplines, so they can market themselves in both another discipline and women studies. Graduates of women studies programs, however, just have women studies as their discipline, so they could potentially be forced to compete for fewer jobs.

There have been two graduates of the Urban Ecology IGERT, and they both received multiple offers, some from research one institutions. They both chose to go to small, liberal arts institutions, where interdisciplinary work seemed to be better supported.
Brianna Keller from Career Services mentioned that in surveying employers asking them to identify what skills graduates could be better at, the primary quality that has come up is being able to articulate their skills. A recent attendee of a dependable strengths workshop mentioned how helpful these workshops are in not only helping participants communicate their strengths, but also helping them to do it from a strength based area. The interdisciplinary path will most likely require students and graduates to tell their story in a special way.

It seems that the easiest position to start from to obtain a job is to have a strong disciplinary training with the interdisciplinary work on top of that.

IV. Open Discussion / Summary

Problem based courses are interesting. (Examples given included: Globalization, Migration, and Citizenship; The City in American Culture.) Are they becoming more common? It's important to have these for problem solving. But are they seen as being less rigorous or less theoretical? Do they have a stigma, being seen as diluting the theoretical strengths of a discipline? Theoretical frontiers can occur between disciplines. One can have both problem solving and strong theoretical development in interdisciplinary research. (And in some programs having a problem solving approach does not have a stigma.)

Disciplines should be challenged. This advances knowledge. Disciplines may feel threatened by interdisciplinary work, but this is good. Unfortunately, there is sometimes competition between disciplines and interdisciplinary work/programs for resources, adding to the threatening aspect of ID work. (In some disciplines this is not an issue, however.)

Some disciplines require so much (background) training in other disciplines, that they are in essence becoming interdisciplinary.

A resource mentioned is the Association for Integrative Studies (AIS): http://www.units.muohio.edu/aisorg/. They have an interdisciplinary email list, job listings, organization links, syllabi, consultants, and more.

Next Steps

- Bring students into the Network of Interdisciplinary Initiatives.
- Post the minutes from this meeting.
- Work on disseminating information.
- Possibly set up an email list or "match.com" for students seeking others doing interdisciplinary work.

This is just a beginning. Thanks to everyone for coming.

Meeting Adjourned: 2:00 P.M.