

Interdisciplinarity

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The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (IASC) is an interdisciplinary research center and “interdisciplinarity” is one of its core commitments. Often standing athwart academic trends, in this respect the Institute is anything but out of step. As a style of thought and a form of intellectual collaboration, interdisciplinarity currently has strong public appeal and is considered cutting-edge in the academy. As an article in *Science* observes: “Interdisciplinarity has become synonymous with all things progressive about research and education.”

Although the meaning of “interdisciplinarity” (and related terms such as “multidisciplinarity” and “cross-disciplinarity”) is somewhat indeterminate and covers many types of “boundary crossing,” I want to distinguish between two general models: the science or research-team model, and the humanities or conversational model. Since universities are organized by discipline-specific departments, the characteristic organizational structures for both models are institutes, programs, and projects. (Free-standing interdisciplinary institutions do exist, but are rare.)

In the science model, researchers from different areas of inquiry come together over an extended period to

address a complex problem, such as HIV/AIDS, or climate change, or mapping the human genome. A report on “bridging disciplines” published by the National Academy of Sciences in 2000 typifies this model. It defines interdisciplinary research as “a cooperative effort by a team of investigators, each expert in the use of different methods and concepts, who have joined in an organized program to attack a challenging problem.” The organizing principle is a division of labor, but true collaboration is also important: “Ongoing communication and reexamination of postulates among team members,” the report continues, “promote broadening of concepts and enrichment of understanding.” In this model, integrated efforts are necessary because the tools of any one discipline are inadequate for the problems under study.

The humanities model is quite different. Here like-minded scholars from various departments come together around specialized methods, theoretical approaches, or areas of common interest, such as feminist thought, or interpretive forms of explanation, or urban studies. The emphasis is on ideas, not technical problem-solving, and interdisciplinarity is expressed in meaningful and open-

ended conversation, not team research. The key forums for intellectual exchange include seminars, reading groups, and personal networks, and in some cases journals and conferences. In contrast with the science model, the motivation to collaborate arises from intellectual choices or personal commitments and (typically) dissatisfaction with disciplinary limitations, not the complexity of problems.

IASC offers a hybrid of these two models. On the one hand, we share some of the thought style and community forms of the humanities model, including the centrality of ideas, the seminar, and intellectual dialogue and debate. On the other hand, like the science model, our interdisciplinarity is driven by complex issues, and inquiry is organized along specific research fronts. The issues are not technical problems that can be “solved,” but deep cultural transformations that can be explored, historically and empirically; whose social implications can be examined; and whose underlying assumptions can be challenged and reconsidered. For this task no single discipline will suffice. ■