
Interdisciplinarity or Integration: Cultivating the Liberal Studies Department at GVSU

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In the winter of 2003, the Liberal Studies Program at Grand Valley was beginning the process of applying for departmental status. Since its early home in the William James College and under the guidance of key faculty in the Philosophy Department, the Liberal Studies Program had played an integral part at GVSU in allowing students the access and ability to create individualized programs of study in their pursuit of a liberal education. The increasing demand for and value of this kind of education was clearly demonstrated by the continual expansion of the number and quality of our majors. From 2000-2003, the Liberal Studies Program grew from twenty-four majors to more than one hundred. Since the number of majors, demand for courses and advising needs were increasing so dramatically, several core Liberal Studies faculty applied for and received a Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center Presidential Teaching Initiatives Award to help facilitate a series of workshops and discussions about the nature of and vision for our emerging department. We knew this process would require careful thinking, planning and vision in order to make the transition interconnected with the teaching values and philosophies of the Liberal Studies faculty, with the mission and goals of GVSU administration, as well as within the larger community of interdisciplinary studies in higher education.

The faculty met two times in the winter 2003 semester to begin the dialogue and formulate an agenda. We then facilitated a two-day intensive workshop at the end of winter 2003 semester to draft mission, vision and values statements and to state our overall objectives for the future Liberal Studies Department and objectives for what we hoped to accomplish in this process. These objectives included:

1. To facilitate the dialogue needed to transition the Liberal Studies Program into the Liberal Studies Department, reviewing course requirements, pedagogy, potential hiring and innovative faculty appointments.
2. To create mission, vision and values statements for the Liberal Studies Department, intentionally shaping through strategic planning what our program offers to GVSU students and the larger community.
3. To engage the history of, the available resources for and the implications that interdisciplinarity has regarding our pedagogy, curriculum and institution.

After the initial workshop, we engaged in extensive reading throughout the spring and summer. The reading list (see references) included a history of interdisciplinary studies, a guide to interdisciplinary resources, and several essays on liberal education, integration, and implementation of interdisciplinarity into pedagogy and curriculum. We maintained dialogue with each other throughout the summer through the Discussion Board feature on a Blackboard site we set up to help facilitate the process. Blackboard allowed us to create both a written record of the evolution of our thinking and a forum to continually re-examine the statements drafted at the end of winter semester. Finally, our project concluded with another intensive two-day workshop just prior to the beginning of the Fall 2003 semester in which we reconvened to revise our statements, and invited the administration of GVSU and William Newell (one of the leading experts in the field of interdisciplinary studies) to engage in additional discussion regarding our process and vision for the transition into departmental status. We continued dialogue of this project through a panel presentation regarding our process at the 25th Annual Conference of the Association for Integrative Studies October 9-12, 2003.

This article will focus on the some of the questions we wrestled with and insights gained while pursuing the above objectives. I will highlight some of the key points in our discussion, but this is by no means a summative exploration of the process; it merely draws upon the readings and ideas I felt to be most mean-

ingful. Undoubtedly, if other faculty members were to articulate what they thought was most meaningful in the process or relevant to their pedagogy and research, this would be a very different article. Some of the ideas in the dialogue, however, may be useful in relationship to the other articles and contributions to this issue of the *Grand Valley Review*.

In the beginning, several of our readings examined the idea of interdisciplinarity, its definition and its relationship to the traditional disciplines in the academy. We noted that through time disciplines blend and create new fields of study, such as Biochemistry or Astrophysics and also that some areas of study draw from several disciplines to offer a multifaceted perspective, such as Women and Gender Studies, or American Studies. When exactly did two disciplines merge to become a new field of study? When did a method of study become interdisciplinary? How did these various responses to the creation and transmission of knowledge and increasingly prevalent interdisciplinary collaboration within the academy relate to our own process of becoming a department? We read about a variety of different programs, departments, centers and institutions committed to the idea of interdisciplinarity, some short-lived, others firmly established. We questioned who we were as faculty and whether what we did was interdisciplinary. To frame some of the ideas in the following discussions, I have adopted Julie Klein's and William Newell's definition which states that interdisciplinary study is "a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that

is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession. Interdisciplinary Studies draws upon disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective.”¹

While we were engaged in this dialogue on interdisciplinarity, Grand Valley was undergoing the process of reorganization which resulted in the current structure of the university. Several Liberal Studies faculty were also engaged in reorganization dialogues and reported faculty from the professional programs had stated that their accreditation standards and guidelines had moved in the last few years away from technical training back toward an education of the whole person, including integration, critical thinking, and cultural dialogue. Many faculty from a wide variety of disciplines were eager to talk with us about the idea of a liberal education, integrative learning and how we could build interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching relationships throughout the university. The discussion in some of these reorganization meetings as well in our own illustrated that many parts of higher education were moving away from disciplinary-bound, specialized and fragmented learning experiences into a more holistic or integrative approach. Reorganization resulted in the formation of the College of Interdisciplinary Studies, a vibrant home for the Liberal Studies Department, area studies, the Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors, the Sustainability Initiative, Padnos International Center, FTLC, and other initiatives which connect, cross or blend the boundaries between the disciplines.

Julie Thompson Klein, an expert in interdisciplinarity, observed that “the creation of hybrid interdisciplinary specializations also marks another shift in boundaries, toward more of a problem-centered and competence-based structures. This development... may signal a gradual but profound shift in the organizational paradigm of higher education, away from the primary context of disciplines to knowledge restructured by application.”² Faculty recognized that this shift would allow for more inquiry based courses as well as creative work and thinking, and would be conducive to collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, such as team teaching, research and publication. Some voiced

the concern however, that an education focused solely on applications, careers or outcomes might be a move away from a liberal education. The heart and soul of the Liberal Studies Department, the faculty agreed, needed to remain rooted in a strong commitment to a liberal education, not necessarily interdisciplinarity. In fact, at one point in the discussions, we even considered the possibility of changing our name to the Interdisciplinary Studies Department, as the word “liberal” often carries a particular set of connotations in West Michigan. The possibility never materialized beyond the discussion, as the faculty agreed that as a department we would and should carry on the tradition of liberal education and the name of Liberal Studies.

In another portion of our dialogues, others noted that the culture of the university and culture in general still seemed to value the specialized learning of the disciplines over a broader or more integrated learning process. Les Adler, in his essay “Uncommon Sense: Liberal Education, Learning Communities, and the Transformative Quest” states in the model of traditional, disciplinary-based system of education that “...the model’s deepest and most rarely challenged message is that specialized learning is somehow higher and of greater value than more generalized education.”³ Whether one looks at surgeons, professional athletes or lawyers, highly trained and educated specialists attract more attention, are more envied and more highly awarded than the generalist with broader abilities. “The act of integrating and relating disparate bits of knowledge...is left entirely to the individual student...competing for grades, collecting units, and preparing for the job market. It is task analogous to expecting each assembly line worker to collect and assemble enough individual parts to create a functioning automobile...”⁴ In addition, faculty promotion and tenure are typically based in a single department and rewards are commensurate with disciplinary scholarship. How would the structure of our department support the faculty in interdisciplinary efforts? Adler echoed many of our own thoughts as he questioned “whether a fragmented system of education can in any effective way produce integrated beings is perhaps the most significant question confronting practitioners of liberal education today.”⁵ Was the form and function of liberal education, the foundation of our

emerging Liberal Studies Department, more compatible with a disciplinary or interdisciplinary approach? More importantly, how did the ideas of the disciplines and of interdisciplinarity engage and inform our teaching? These were complex questions with no easy answers. And our discussions continued.

Further dialogue centered around the nature of interdisciplinarity itself and questions such as, “Where and how does one get the authority to be interdisciplinary?” and “Do faculty have to be firmly grounded and published in a particular discipline to draw examples and methods from it?” Answers varied and we discussed the differences between drawing from a particular discipline for a particular class discussion, and various interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary aspects in our teaching. The danger, and generally unspoken paradox in many of the essays we read, lay in allowing interdisciplinarity to become another discipline. Most faculty agreed that, since most liberal studies courses are discussion based, the authority to draw from different disciplines comes from the courage to tackle the more difficult issues and talking through them with their students. Most students are only vaguely aware of the idea of the disciplines, though often unknowingly bring disciplinary perspectives in through their dialogue and examples. Many questions or themes involving larger issues such as life, death, love, truth or suffering transcend disciplinary boundaries, and no one discipline can claim solitary authority over them.

Much of the discussion about interdisciplinarity was firmly connected to teaching and learning issues. The increasing emphasis on a higher education as a consumeristic process as well as a focus on specialization were recognized as barriers to a liberal education. Since our faculty come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, many disciplinary elements and methodologies are present in the courses we teach; however, not always or necessarily are these disciplinary perspectives explained in depth in the classroom. After engaging the literature, language and arguments surrounding interdisciplinarity, we concluded that our main concerns for our new department were more centered on holistic learning, collaboration, integration, and active teaching and learning.

Toward the end of our discussions, we determined that our teaching was in essence more integrative than interdisciplinary. Integrative learning is:

essentially holistic thinking, in which the different facets of a complex reality exposed through different disciplinary lenses are combined into a new whole that is larger than its constituent parts, that cannot be reduced to the separate disciplinary insights from which it emerged. [...] It requires an act of creative imagination, a leap from the simplified perspectives that give the disciplines their power to a more holistic perspective of a richer, more complex whole.⁶

Creativity and synthesis are at the heart of the integrative process and our courses. We determined that since our teaching is organic, constantly transforming and integrative in nature, the emerging Liberal Studies Department must also be.

Our process of many months of discussion regarding the history of the Liberal Studies Program and its connections to the William James College included the exploration of possible interdisciplinary and organizational structures based on examination of other universities' existing programs. We wrestled with language, meanings, nuance and the nature of our work and ultimately decided that the term interdisciplinarity did not fully represent our emerging identity as a department or our individual work. We drafted the following mission, vision and value statements in which the idea of interdisciplinarity is embedded, but not stated:

Mission Statement—We champion liberal and integrative learning. Our department provides the framework for student-designed courses of study that inspire lifelong learning and responsible participation in our overlapping communities.

Vision Statement—The Liberal Studies Department brings students and faculty together as a model community of self-directed learners engaged in the transformative process of Liberal Education. We cultivate social and personal responsibility through experiential and integrative learning. We bring intellectual traditions into dialogue with current perspectives and personal values in order to shape our ever-changing world.

In addition to its mission and vision statements, the Liberal Studies Department affirms GVSU's value statements. We also value:

- The Examined Life
- Innovative Pedagogy
- Social Justice Consciousness

In order to bring the Liberal Studies Department closer to its vision, we have set the following three priorities: First, increasing visibility to enhance our voice on campus and in surrounding communities. Second, building and recruiting faculty to expand representation in faculty governance, serve as advisors, and integrate a greater variety of intellectual perspectives. And finally, creating community among students, faculty and Alumni. All of these statements, values and priorities are designed to cross boundaries and build partnerships. They are integrative, but not necessarily interdisciplinary, in nature and function.

Judy Whipps, chair of the Liberal Studies Department, explains the distinction between interdisciplinarity and integration:

In thinking about Liberal Studies, the term “interdisciplinary” was not sufficient because our focus is grounded in the tradition of the liberal arts and more particularly, the humanities. We do not focus primarily on the interdisciplinary method of bringing one or more disciplines in dialogue with each other. Instead we focus on integrating aspects of knowledge with the students' lives and communi-

ties, in the context of their historical and cultural and philosophical traditions. Integrative education returns to the basic “big questions” of life, where knowledge and understanding come together and create more than the sum of the interdisciplinary parts.

The workshops, dialogues and ongoing reflection and thinking about interdisciplinarity have laid the foundations of a healthy and vibrant department dedicated to enriching the lives of our students and GVSU community. While our discussion of the nature and process of interdisciplinarity and integration are by no means over, we have grown comfortable with the complexity of the dialogue both on the national academic level and as it applies in our individual teaching and courses. The Liberal Studies Department has found a home in the College of Interdisciplinary Studies, values integration, continues cultivating engaged students, and welcomes further dialogue with faculty throughout the university about the nature and application of these issues.

Endnotes

- ¹ Klein, J. and Newell, W. “Advancing Interdisciplinary Studies” In J. Gaff and J. Ratcliffe (Eds.), *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Comprehensive Guide to Purposes, Structures, Practices, and Changes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. 393-394.
- ² Klein, Julie Thompson. *The Academy in Transition: Mapping Interdisciplinary Studies*. Washington, D.C.: The Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1999. 6-7.
- ³ Adler, Les. In *Reinventing Ourselves: Interdisciplinary Education, Collaborative Learning and Experimentation in Higher Education*, 151.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 151
- ⁶ Newell, William H. “Interdisciplinary Curriculum Development” *Issues in Integrative Studies*. 8, 1990. 74.

References

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