

Curricular Roots: Where Interdisciplinary Graduate Education Needs to Flourish

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The value of inter- or cross- or transdisciplinarity, which I'll merge here in the sense of speaking about convergence, is widely acknowledged across the landscape of higher education in the U.S. and beyond. Most school-specific or university-wide strategic plans underscore interdisciplinary opportunities and how they enhance learning, research, and community. My institution—Washington University in St. Louis—is one of a handful that have in recent years created high-level positions (in our case, a new [Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Initiatives](#)) to supercharge interdisciplinary scholarship across schools. In the past two years we have also developed an [Incubator for Transdisciplinary Futures](#) that is currently supporting 14 teams working on multi-year projects, drawing around 150 faculty from all across the university.

We're not alone. Virginia Tech has established an [Academy of Transdisciplinary Studies](#). The University of Iowa's [Obermann Center for Advanced Studies](#) has been a leader of interdisciplinary conversations, centering in recent years on [Humanities for the Public Good](#). Claremont Graduate University has a [Transdisciplinary Studies Program](#). And Duke University, which has made interdisciplinary connections a centerpiece of institutional strategy since the 1970s, offers inspiration for thinking about what is possible with the [Bass Connections](#) program. In every instance, graduate students are engaged in collaborative, cross-field research and learning.

Of course, the notion of interdisciplinarity has for decades been a point of reference that has been celebrated as a frontier in the production of knowledge. In many instances this reference is to connections among adjacent areas—the literary scholar whose work has crossover with cultural historians; the chemist whose lab has students from physics. Nevertheless, these are often rich pairings that yield expanded opportunities and insights, more compelling research products, and, when thinking of graduate education, more exciting trajectories from the point of view of students.

And yet... or in spite of these examples of institutional value and the idea of interdisciplinary training being a central feature of the graduate experience, there is a huge hurdle: graduate program curricula.

While the examples noted above illustrate amazing instances of graduate students benefitting from interdisciplinary connections, most of these are extra-curricular—that is, happening outside of or beyond what their graduate program requires or allows for the degree. For interdisciplinary graduate education to flourish in a sustainable way, where opportunities have recurrence—not for decades on end, but at least for multiple cohorts of graduate students—there must be curricular roots. Put differently, graduate programs must consider curricular revision.

Curricular revision can be challenging on a variety of fronts. Within departments, there may be particular interests associated with certain courses or how frequently they're taught, and by whom. There may be concerns about removing one or multiple courses from a curriculum that has been in place for decades, especially when such a change pulls the strings of disciplinary identity, and putting in their place courses that seem distantly if at all related to the field. Put

differently, graduate faculty may find it challenging to align field expertise with expanded horizons. Beyond departments, curricular revision is often time intensive, with several layers of review.

That said, the scale of reform does not have to be large. In fact, starting small, with one or two courses, is the most plausible, politically viable, and practical way to have buy in and to allow for assessment of how such changes can impact the graduate student experience.

At WashU we are experimenting with a version of this called [Arts & Sciences CREATES](#) (Cohort REcruiting And Transdisciplinary Experiences), led by the Office of Graduate Studies in partnership with faculty across the school. CREATES is a cohort model initiative that will provide PhD students an expanded, cross-departmental learning community and supercharged possibilities for research collaboration. Each year, A&S CREATES will introduce a new cohort theme selected and designed by faculty colleagues. Cohort themes are broad, though they align with areas of faculty strength; field trends or spaces for innovation; and connect to the A&S Strategic Plan. Each cohort's experiences will run for approximately two years.

From recruitment on, students who choose to join a cohort group develop a stronger sense of intellectual community. These students benefit from both their departmental peer communities as well as the cohort community across programs. They will take a course (or courses) together that satisfy requirements across multiple programs, reinforcing the sense of intellectual connections; and they participate in programmatically supported cross-disciplinary networks that can fuel collaboration and creativity on campus and beyond.

We're currently in the recruiting phase for our first cohort—focused on Public Scholarship—which is set to begin in fall 2024. Thus far there has been incredible enthusiasm, with thirteen of our twenty-one PhD programs signing on to participate. The only requirement is that participating programs count the cohort course toward the coursework requirement in their department, ensuring that the experience is built in to a student's curriculum rather than being an additional component. Finally, there is no financial commitment on the part of participating departments or programs. Rather, participating units will benefit from additional financial resources to undertake cohort activities and support the intellectual community being developed. So, all things considered, the cohort experience is one of added value for the participating departments.

In short, the curriculum in graduate programs is the bedrock of the graduate experience. Incorporating the institutional value ascribed to interdisciplinarity within program curricula—that is, creating those curricular roots—is the strongest way to ensure that interdisciplinary graduate education flourishes.