

Overcoming Obstacles to Interdisciplinary Research

By Robert Kelly

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Although scholarship often crosses academic disciplines, higher education institutions often are not adequately equipped to properly fund and recognize interdisciplinary scholarship. As a result, faculty often “steal time” from their traditional departmental duties to create new forms of scholarship that do not fit neatly into a single discipline, says Susan Frost, consultant and former vice president of strategic development at Emory University.

The problem, Frost says, is that too often academic leaders adopt a bureaucratic managerial style based on traditional academic-unit boundaries.

“I think [academic leaders] walk into this new role that has a strong managerial requirement, and somehow that takes precedence over the opportunity for real leadership,” Frost says.

The role of department chair requires some managerial approaches for things like budgets and human resources issues, but “the approaches they are forced to use there sort of bleed over into the more important leadership roles,” Frost says. “You certainly have to take care of things like budgets with your manager’s hat on, but we found that those kinds of approaches don’t really work when you’re talking to faculty about creating or boosting their academic work.”

Frost recommends a “liberal arts” leadership approach that encourages connections with people in other departments and in other schools and is less concerned about the boundaries between departments.

“The most creative leaders actually find ways to bring budgets to bear on those blurred boundaries and networks rather than trying to protect the budget strictly for their department or unit. When leaders are forming coalitions and allowing these budgets to be shared or if they’re willing to contribute to projects across budget lines, then great things happen with the faculty,” Frost says.

A major challenge to sharing budgets across academic units is that many institutions have fairly inflexible accounting procedures, making collaboration across campus difficult.

Department chairs at Emory told Frost that in some cases faculty would seek research partners at other institutions even when the expertise was available on campus simply because it was too hard to work out the budget issues with other units on campus. Working with partners at other institutions is certainly beneficial, but when faculty work with outside partners, they wind up

sharing funding with another institution rather than keeping the funding at the home institution, Frost notes.

The tendency to seek partners from outside the institution comes from partnerships people form in graduate schools, “the idea that a sociologist is a sociologist first and a citizen of the university second,” and the fact that sharing funds between institutions requires clearly articulated agreements -- something that is less common among departments at a single institution, Frost says.

At many institutions, informal agreements in which one partner administers the funds for an inter-departmental project are common. “This kind of [interdisciplinary] work is so dominant now that the courtesy agreements won’t work anymore. We actually need real financial agreements about sharing funds and sharing credit. I think credit is as important as the budget,” Frost says.

Until these issues are resolved, faculty other than those strongly dedicated to working with partners on campus will most likely seek research partners from other institutions. “We found no scarcity of desire among scholars to go into research projects together or go into team teaching, but the system of sharing credit is so unwieldy that often it drains all their energy, and they give up,” Frost says.

In a study of 11 interdisciplinary initiatives at Emory University, Frost and her colleagues found that the successful projects

- had one or two passionate leaders
- focused on a real problem in society
- had early support from participants’ academic units.

Based on these findings, Frost recommends that interdisciplinary researchers begin with the question rather than the bureaucracy. “If you try to lead with the bureaucracy or the organizational chart in the beginning, [the project] will almost always die of its own weight.”

To provide support for these initiatives, Frost recommends that leaders encourage faculty to bring their interdisciplinary work out in the open. “Most active faculty have activities like that in which they are collaborating with someone, trying to start a center, do research, or develop a team-teaching project -- something they feel is not going to be really embraced by the department because it goes outside the department. They’re worried about the budget and the credit for it. I would get a few people who trusted me to put those on the table, and I would figure out a way to reward them,” Frost says. “I would try to expand the definition of legitimate, honored academic work to make it ok to be doing these thing that aren’t strictly held in the department. I would not devalue the regular work of the scholar; I would just want to make this shared work as legitimate as the unshared work.”

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