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UNCERTAIN PATHS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES PROGRAMS AND THEIR FACULTIES:

Critical Stakes to Claim

by

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Abstract: The following response to Henry (2005a) identifies other recent and current challenges to undergraduate interdisciplinary studies programs and their faculties. These challenges can include their administrative and physical locations within the University as well as certain trends associated with the market-driven corporate university, such as the devaluation of teaching faculty. Szostak's (2006) question, "Whither interdisciplinary studies?" is considered in light of current developments in the humanities, as evidenced by recent issues of the Modern Language Association's publication focusing on professional concerns, *Profession*. I conclude by suggesting that undergraduate IDS programs must establish their own spaces and territories as well as publish more widely-read, influential books about interdisciplinarity.

The ever-growing scholarship on the subject of interdisciplinary research strongly suggests that it will continue to grow in importance. But what about undergraduate interdisciplinary studies programs, especially at state-funded universities? Will they also continue to grow and prosper? As Stuart Henry (2005a) has pointed out, student demographics and educational statistics seem to suggest as much but, as he also cautions, programs of interdisciplinary studies may not continue to exist in their present form. My initial response to Henry's (2005b) question regarding recent and current threats to interdisciplinarity, "So what gives?" was simple: Wrong question!

Instead of reflecting on what has been happening to us, we need to think about what we, as interdisciplinarians, want to do. As Klein (2005) has already cogently pointed out, we also need to consider this question in the context of the changing dynamics of the humanities in 21st century American higher education.

While it is easy to buy into the deceptively monolithic category of "interdisciplinarians," as though the many practitioners are one, feminist theory, let alone postmodernist discourse, would find such a classification simplistic and normalizing. Interdisciplinarians are an extremely diverse group, impossible to categorize. Yet, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1984-85) notion of "strategic essentialism" suggests a means for academic interdisciplinarians who are teaching in undergraduate interdisciplinary programs to suspend temporarily their diversity and differences and defer to professional interests in order to ensure that they can stake claims to all of the following:

- Their respective teaching program's stability
- Their own job stability¹
- Assured self-governance
- Full membership and representation in university-wide faculty governance
- Prestige, for their program, their students, and themselves
- Fair and objective systems of incentives and recognitions, such as rewards, for excellent scholarship, teaching, and service
- Eligibility for internal university grants and residencies available to other faculty within the same institution
- Fair compensation for their hard work, commitment and dedication

If these are professional goals that interdisciplinarians truly want, and it is not unreasonable to assume that they are, then there is a simple plan of action: the faculty of each local interdisciplinary program need to follow the standards and assessment procedures used by their respective universities. Perhaps, unfortunately, the educational agendas of many experimental interdisciplinary programs and colleges created in the 1960s and 1970s seem—dare I say it—rather utopian in the age of the corporate university, which has been described by Readings (1996) as a "university in ruins," with its emphases on performance and excellence. Continuing to insist on maintaining the status quo can only lead to a continuation of the status

quo: to further academic marginalization, instability, isolation and, in some universities better left unnamed, irrelevance.

The case of Wayne State University (WSU) is compelling because of that program's longstanding history, innovative track record, service to its student demographics, commitment to access, and its star faculty who have many publications, both in specific disciplines and in our interdisciplinary field. Henry has persuasively outlined a call for action that has proven to be somewhat effective at WSU, but he is skeptical about how long that will sustain the program and at what cost, not the least of which is the cost of faculty and leadership attrition.² But, even with its continued, if transformed, presence, what might work at one institution is no guaranteed formula for another: interdisciplinary programs are as diverse as their particular institution's cultures. Interdisciplinary programs and colleges can be easily dismantled, as is so evident in the case of Arizona International University. And they can be created and even morphed, as demonstrated in the example of the Interdisciplinary Studies in Culture and Society undergraduate degree at Emory University, which was formerly a degree in liberal studies. What seems to be a constant among many interdisciplinary studies programs is that they exist and function in a state of constant flux.

The Problem of Location and Its Effects

Henry's brief history of the recent migrations of WSU's interdisciplinary studies program is a cautionary tale against interdisciplinary studies' lack of secure space. In general, interdisciplinary studies programs remain problematic *vis-à-vis* both their administrative and physical locations within the university. As Henry persuasively argues, disciplinary hegemony is a large part of the problem. Nevertheless, it is far from the whole story. We have to take into consideration certain trends associated with the market-driven corporate university, such as its relentless devaluation of teaching faculty who do not bring in grants or prestige to the university but commit themselves thoroughly to serving students. Upper-level administration may all too easily justify the devaluation of teaching faculty, but the usual mantra of "supply and demand" fails to make the practice any less morally and ethically reprehensible. The unsettling fact remains that presently very few undergraduate interdisciplinary studies programs grant tenure to their own faculty, and even when they do, those faculty share joint appointments with more traditional, discipline-based departments.

Consequently, as universities devise more ways to instill post-tenure

reviews, revoke tenure, force retirement, and/or do away with tenure altogether, committed academic interdisciplinarians find themselves increasingly at risk of never attaining tenure-track positions, let alone obtaining tenure. At this juncture it remains debatable whether or not large interdisciplinary studies programs, such as the interdisciplinary studies degree program at Arizona State University (ASU), which is both taught and administered by lecturers, will remain committed to granting multi-year contracts to their core faculty of lecturers for the long term. Currently at ASU the biggest defense, it seems, remains the ever-increasing number of students—but should the number of majors ever dwindle, as it has in the case of the humanities nationwide, what will happen then? Indeed, the growth in students at WSU's interdisciplinary studies program did not stop the past several years of intrusions; there are some who might claim that a large number of interdisciplinary students can be an embarrassment for a disciplinary-based, prestige-hungry university.

Besides the lack of job stability for those without tenure, faculty devaluation also rears its head in terms of lack of faculty incentives and rewards. Here again the case of ASU's interdisciplinary studies degree program is instructive. Until the fall of 2004 the interdisciplinary studies degree program, which was previously known as the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies Program (see Augsberg, 2003), was not even housed in a college or school. Since then it has undergone numerous structural changes, not the least of them including placement in the recently created School of Interdisciplinary Studies that houses additional faculties as well as serving as the incubator for new interdisciplinary programs.³

While the change in location is generally regarded as a considerable improvement, the real beneficiaries are the students, who now have a school from which to graduate, and the university, which will benefit from the interdisciplinary studies degree's increased visibility, prestige, and alumni donations. And what about the faculty, who paradoxically, had lobbied tirelessly and done much of the legwork for the degree to be housed in a college or school? As of 2007, they remain lecturers or senior lecturers on multi-year contracts and are not even eligible for the university's highest teaching awards. At best, teaching as a lecturer in the interdisciplinary studies program is regarded by some faculty members as akin to being at a waiting station. One works hard while waiting for conditions to improve—or to obtain something "better," i.e., a tenure-track position. Indeed, during the nine years I taught in the program (1998-2007), I was asked repeatedly by tenured faculty in other departments, "What! Are you still here?" Even worse,

I had been told publicly by more than one administrator, “Well, if you are still here, it must be because you couldn’t find a job elsewhere!” And when I did get hired as a tenure-track assistant professor somewhere else, another administrator privately expressed to me feelings of utter astonishment and incredulity that I could have been offered such a position.

Such comments are reminiscent of Petrie’s (1976) observation that interdisciplinary studies programs are oft viewed as dumping grounds for faculty. It might be hard for disciplinarians to acknowledge, but interdisciplinarians actually love what they do and what their field represents, let alone the possibilities it creates. For those who prefer to forge their own intellectual paths, interdisciplinarity may be the only viable and/or desirable option.

So, instead of wallowing in everything that we don’t have, vis-à-vis those in traditional disciplines, a better approach might be to devise ways to improve our situation. Henry’s (2005a) suggestions are helpful for collective faculties in response to severe crises, such as the ones recently faced at WSU. However, in my view, we need to act more vigorously on a local level and respond accordingly to our respective situations. I also believe that we need to look at other successful longstanding interdisciplinary programs such as women’s studies and learn from their examples. While some may argue that women’s studies programs continue to have their own struggles as they remain marginalized and under-funded, from my standpoint I see that they at least usually offer tenure-track lines to their faculty.⁴ I agree with Rick Szostak insofar as I too think we need to develop further interdisciplinary pedagogy, theory, methods, and problems. To put it succinctly, a better response to Henry’s question is not so much “What do interdisciplinarians want?” as “What are interdisciplinarians willing to do . . . and where?”

“Precarious Futures”?

Such musings regarding location lead me to respond next to Rick Szostak’s rhetorical question, “*Whither interdisciplinary studies?*” I believe that no one *really* knows where interdisciplinary studies programs are going, including even the most benevolent university administrators and presidents. Two nascent developments are worrisome, as neither bodes well for interdisciplinary studies programs should they progress any further. The first is the growing popularity of private for-profit colleges and universities. Will interdisciplinary studies programs become universities’ response to what they deem as competition for students and thus threats to potential tuition

revenue? If that is the case, then it will be in their interest to emulate not simply the for-profit curricula, with their five- or six-week rolling semesters, but also their standard practice of exclusively employing adjuncts as faculty (who are only required to have master’s degrees and are deemed qualified to teach due to their status as “working professionals”). Should universities decide to go down that path, the futures of interdisciplinary studies programs and their faculty are very dark indeed.

The second development stems from the growing decline of college students majoring in the humanities. Recent volumes of *Profession*, the annual MLA publication about professional concerns, are rife with variant expressions of anxiety regarding the future of the humanities in general and of literature departments in particular. Indeed, Robert Scholes’s introduction to the Presidential Forum, *The Future of the Humanities*, aptly titled, “Whither, or Wither, The Humanities?” in *Profession 2005*, indicates that while literature professors seem to be as certain as academic interdisciplinarians with regard to where their profession is heading, they are perhaps more openly worried that things could turn out badly.⁵ Accompanying this concern in several articles is a keen, almost obsessive interest in interdisciplinarity. At least one author paints “precarious futures” for “interdisciplinary formations” (Leitch, 2000, p. 126), even though several voice their support for interdisciplinarity (Leitch, 2000; Davidson & Goldberg, 2004; Dasenbrock, 2004; Menand, 2005), with one even declaring, “[I]nterdisciplinarity is here to stay” (Dasenbrock, 2004, p. 65). Interdisciplinarity is considered “good,” but only because of the strong conviction that “it is, after all, only the institutional ratification of disciplinarity” (Menand, 2005, p. 14).

We have heard such arguments previously, particularly from Harvard professor Louis Menand, also a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* (2001). Thus, we should consider Menand’s judgment of interdisciplinarity more carefully in its proper context, that is, within his proposal for saving the humanities:

Humanities departments do not need to retrench; they need, on the contrary, to colonize. Interdisciplinarity is a bee with a fair amount of buzz in it these days. Humanists keep saying that they want more interdisciplinarity. They’re right. Interdisciplinarity is good. But it is only the institutional ratification of disciplinarity. It’s premised precisely on the belief that the disciplines represent discrete programs of inquiry, and there is nothing remotely transgressive about it. . . . What humanities departments should want is not interdisciplinarity

or postdisciplinarity, and they should definitely not want consilience, which is a bargain with the devil. What they need to do is hunt down the disciplines whose subject matter they covet and bring them down to their own realm. (2005, p. 14)

Quite frankly, I find it surprising that a renowned Harvard literature professor would deploy militaristic (“retrench”), imperialistic (“colonize”), predatory (“hunt down”), and even religious (“covet”—as in “Thou Shalt Not Covet”; “bargain with the devil”) language in his call to action against interdisciplinarity. Even more incredible is the fact that his peer reviewers and editor let such baited language slide. Do desperate times require desperate measures? Surely Menand means well—he is, after all, attempting to save humanities departments and all that comes with them: their spaces, their locations within the university, and, of course, their faculty members’ jobs. But why does Menand think interdisciplinarity can save the humanities? Menand continues with the following:

To the extent that programs—and particularly graduate programs—consist of a guided tour of the Norton Anthology, literature programs are perpetuating their isolation. Why aren’t all literature majors required to take a course on the sociology of literature? Or a course on literature and philosophy, or literature and science? Why do students of literature have to take their history courses in history departments when literature departments could offer them history for literature students? This seems a minor curricular point, but it goes to the fear academics have that their fields will be dumbed down if they stray from their traditional boundaries. It’s the boundaries themselves that are dumbing us down. Interdisciplinarity begins at home. (2005, p. 14)

While I applaud Menand’s endorsement of interdisciplinarity, I am very troubled by his suggestion that the disciplines can somehow absorb or incorporate interdisciplinarity into their own domains. If disciplines succeed in making the claim that they are *always already* interdisciplinary (which would be a fitting tribute to Derridean deconstruction for humanists!), then what would interdisciplinary studies programs offer that disciplines (and disciplinary departments) do not? It seems to me that interdisciplinary studies programs *must* stake multiple claims for themselves. If we don’t create our own space, our own territory, we will be subsumed into impoverished and vulnerable disciplinary departments or programs within institutions—or we will be used to help fortify clusters of ailing disciplines,

such as departments that house several disciplines in the humanities. We, as interdisciplinarians, must make the case that we have unique skills, methods, perspectives, and subjects of study—just as Szostak advocates. We already do so in the classroom and in our professional literature. But we have to go beyond preaching to the choir. We need to follow Julie Thompson Klein’s pioneering example, and publish more widely read, influential books about interdisciplinarity, and particularly those on the value of interdisciplinary study. If esteemed scholars such as Menand cite cross-disciplinary courses such as the sociology of literature as interdisciplinary, then we have our work cut out for us. To quote what I wrote a decade ago about the future of performance studies—a postmodern interdisciplinary field if there ever was one—“the future of the field depends on it” (Augsborg 1995, p.171).

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Notes

¹ Most if not all who currently work in academia know that there no longer is any such thing as job security, even for tenured professors. However, if a program lacks stability, there is no way of knowing whether or not it or one’s own faculty position will continue to exist from one year to the next.

² Henry’s own exodus from WSU to San Diego State University in 2006 is a case in point.

³ As this commentary was going to press in July 2007, the name of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies was officially changed to the School of Letters and Sciences.

⁴ After noting that two well-regarded undergraduate interdisciplinary programs have added multiple tenure-track lines since 2005 (the Interdisciplinary Studies program at University of Texas at Arlington and the Liberal Studies Program at San Francisco State University), I concluded that the existence of tenure-track lines in an undergraduate interdisciplinary studies program signals whether or not an institution is willing to put a long-term investment into an interdisciplinary studies program’s faculty. This personal conclusion was a major contributing factor in my decision to leave ASU to join the faculty of San Francisco State in 2007.

⁵ It should be noted that Klein (2005) ends the conclusion to her timely book, *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity*, with a section called “Wither Humanities?” (p. 216).

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