

A White Paper About the Grey Zones of Transdisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Study On the CU Boulder Campus

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As co-author of this paper, please permit me to summarize an incident that inspired this paper. As an East coast graduate student in 2011, I was stunned speechless when my MFA dance advisor began our thesis consultation meeting by flipping straight to the bibliography of my paper. Red pen in hand, he deftly and dramatically began to strike source materials that were not from the arena of dance. He proceeded to argue that because I was not credentialed in other fields, I could not meaningfully synthesize the theoretical material from their scholarly offerings.

The same battle arose when as a artist/scholar of the Middle East/North African region, I was barred from utilizing my elective credits to take Arabic and Ethnomusicology of the Arab World because they were not within the dance department. In order for me to actualize my interests, I had to defy my mentors and take the courses as overloads to my full schedule and fellowship duties. This amounted to 23 graduate credit hours in one semester. The adversarial tone of ideological and artistic suppression endured throughout my entire educational experience.

I detected connections and reflection where other scholars wore blinders, and I had to fight to elucidate those observations in writing to the perpetual disapproval of my advisor. I was told my interests were a dead end and amounted to career suicide. They were wrong.

We chose to co-author this paper because from our two seemingly divergent fields of study, we both agree that CU Boulder is at a crossroads. Our increasing relevance lies in our ability to be nimble and open to emerging scholarship; our ability press the pause button in our established patterns to be imaginative, future-bending and unconventional in our thinking. We promote this scholarly receptivity in our marketing, but struggle to coordinate students' interdisciplinary aspirations across divisions, majors and schools. Our 2016 - 2017 effort to retool our core requirements was a fantastic first step to transdisciplinary thinking, and we can do so much more.

Conversations may already be in progress regarding how we serve and support students with transdisciplinary interests that we are not party to. If so, please let this paper be another affirmation for that effort, and a potential refinement to the considerations of our campus from colleagues who have navigated, survived and grown to thrive in transdisciplinary studies. From our limited vantage point, there are logistical models of transdisciplinary degree configuration that warrant consideration and will be summarized here.

The incorporation of multi- and transdisciplinary programs of study is not unique. Large, state universities including Michigan State University and Indiana State University are examples of institutions similar to the University of Colorado Boulder which have embraced the concept and integrated these degrees into their curriculum offerings. Similar approaches are being adopted by leading universities such as MIT where six interdisciplinary undergraduate degrees are offered, Carnegie-Mellon University where 13 interdisciplinary programs are offered, and Vanderbilt University where a growing number of departments are developing joint program offerings. These universities recognize that students are entering a world that is not divided along disciplinary lines, but instead requires students to be nimble and able to perform multiple roles within an organization.

In these programs, interdisciplinary work is not viewed as a “watering down” of disciplinary knowledge, but rather is viewed as a reflection of where knowledge and the broader society is moving. In response, universities are adopting two primary models from which to address the unique needs of interdisciplinary students.

- Departments of interdisciplinary studies are emerging where students are formally rostered and administered academically in the same manner as traditional disciplines. These departments are overseen by an academic director, have specific advisors, and administrative assistants. The faculty continue to reside in disciplinary home departments. This is similar to programs at CU Boulder such as International Affairs.
- Individualized Majors are a second approach that has existed in many universities for an extended period of time. In fact, CU Boulder used to allow individualized majors until recently. In this option, faculty committees ensure that a cohesive academic plan is implemented and followed by the student. This option allows each student to pursue individual objectives while maintaining academic standards.

In each of these models the emphasis is similar; allow students to develop programs that meet their individual needs in anticipation for new workforce and societal opportunities. More importantly, these models are breaking down the barriers erected by traditional disciplines and the associated siloed thinking. The approaches represent a next generation of thinking for traditional universities.

As CU Boulder contemplates its future through the Academic Futures process, an important element of this consideration should be how students of all types and interests can be supported in their academic pathways. How do we prevent students from being told that their interests do not align with an academic discipline. In this age of discovery, how do we achieve a balance between transdisciplinary interest and traditional discipline-based academic rigor?

The answer to this question is not simple. Our university has almost 150 years of disciplinary tradition. However, the past should not shackle the opportunities of the future. Rather, freedom of exploration and independent pursuit of knowledge should be encouraged equally with the

pursuit of traditional disciplinary knowledge. The challenge is not whether or not this is a good idea to pursue. Peer universities have already answered that question by setting this path in motion. Rather, the challenge is how to move our campus forward to meet this demand.

Operationally, the examples of mechanisms for success already exist as detailed previously. For CU Boulder the challenge is having the will to diverge from long-held practices. From this perspective, it is recommended that the university reinvigorate the individualized major option while also bringing together a core group of faculty to oversee the option. We believe that many faculty have interest in this topic and that a group of faculty would not be difficult to find who would agree to oversee this endeavor.

It is admittedly not simple for specialized professionals to attain proficiency, comfort and conversancy in other fields of study. But for those who crave it, it is the lifeline that sustains their intellectual life. As co-authors of this paper, we identify with this inner drive. The ability to identify common denominators and re-vision conventional responses to problem-solving is vital yet never obvious. Our request to fortify CU Boulder's transdisciplinary possibilities is a *preemptive* effort to lay down tracks, providing an arena for imagining and exploring beyond what we *think* we know. Rigorous transdisciplinary methodologies are a valid possibility, and the co-authors are far from being the only CU faculty willing to eagerly engage this kind of inquiry.

Yes, there are obstacles and challenges that will be faced with moving this campus towards transdisciplinary tolerance and enthusiasm. However, the failure to recognize the demand for this opportunity will be harmful for both individual students and the overall campus. No student should be placed in a position where their interest in pursuing knowledge is considered wasteful or outside the standards. A university should be the first place a student can go to pursue and share knowledge in all areas. We need to make CU Boulder a place where this pursuit is fostered, not a place where new horizons are closed before the pursuit can even begin.