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## On the Growth and Value of Interdisciplinary Studies

Posted By *Constance C. Relihan and Zachary M. Hilpert* On May 3, 2021 @ 5:01 am In Curriculum Planning and Development | [No Comments](#)

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In fall 2016, there were 61 undergraduate students majoring in interdisciplinary studies at our university. By the fall of 2020, that number had risen to 315. This spring the program lists 460 majors. During the entire 2016–2017 academic year, we saw 55 students graduate with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies. This semester, spring 2021, we are on track to graduate approximately 100 students, who will join the 70 who graduated in the fall and the likely 30–40 who will graduate during summer 2021—nearly four times the number five years ago.

The growth in our program is the result of some local policy decisions, certainly, but it is also consistent with trends across US colleges and universities. Nationally, multi- and interdisciplinary studies at the undergraduate level are growing in popularity. According to College Factual (n.d.), in 2018–2019, multi/interdisciplinary studies ranked as the 13th most popular major nationally, and 102,014 baccalaureate degrees in multi/interdisciplinary studies were awarded. This number represents almost a 4.3 percent increase in degrees awarded over the previous year.

Why has the major become so popular? There are a few reasons. Some are related to what current US students want from a university education; some are related to persistent ways in which we make our traditional programs inhospitable to many students.

### Customizability

A significant advantage of interdisciplinary studies programs is that they provide students with more options to follow their interests and pursue their particular plans. Many interdisciplinary studies programs, like [ours at VCU](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, permit a student to develop their own major plan of study, combining courses from different academic areas into a program that is unified by their explanation of how the planned program will permit them to meet their goals. There are a few areas of study that students tend to gravitate toward—communications, business, computer science, psychology, and visual design—but the combinations they select are as varied as the futures these students envision for themselves. We have seen students mix their interests in a wide range of ways:

Combining religious studies, communications, and management in preparation for going to the seminary

Tailoring courses in mass communication, political science, and gender to support a commitment to a career advocating for individuals living with HIV/AIDS

Completing courses in Chinese language and culture in combination with business courses to facilitate the founding of a business designing and importing kayaks

Combining a major in engineering with a second interdisciplinary major focused on the skills needed to pursue a career in theme park design and management

Linking pre-med courses with courses in international studies and sociology to prepare for a career in Doctors Without Borders after completing medical school

Students who insist on designing their own major are often students who have a clear vision of their future. They are entrepreneurial and broad minded. They recognize that the complex challenges our world faces need to be solved by the application of multiple paradigms of thought, that the siloed thinking of the traditional academy does not foster the development of the multivariate skills and perspectives that the future demands. And, in fact, careers in interdisciplinary areas are expected to grow 9.8 percent between 2016 and 2026. That's roughly the same as the projected growth for careers in accounting and greater than the projected growth for computer workers (College Factual, n.d.).

## Career readiness skills

Interdisciplinary studies students also recognize that whatever their future holds, the odds are good that their specific major will not be the determinant of the job they get or the career they pursue after graduation. Most students—David Epstein (2019, p. 50) uses the figure of 75 percent—simply do not pursue a career based on their undergraduate major.

These students recognize that what they need are what the National Association of Colleges and Employers (n.d.), based on extensive research among employers, terms the essential career readiness competencies [2]:

Critical thinking

Communication

Teamwork

Technology

Leadership

Professionalism

Career and self-development

Equity and inclusion

Not only are these competencies essential to making college graduates competitive when they enter the job market, but they are also the skills graduates will need to succeed in their careers—that is, to keep their jobs and be promoted. And those skills are integral to a self-designed interdisciplinary studies major that requires a student to actively select their areas of study, articulate the integration of their choices, and participate in experiential learning that brings that intellectual integration to life.

Another way to think about the value of interdisciplinary studies to promote career preparation is to reflect on the argument of Joseph Aoun in *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (2017). Aoun argues that the future of higher education lies in ensuring that students are educated in three sets of skills: technological literacy, data science, and the skills that only humans (and not machines) can possess. An interdisciplinary education challenges students to construct complex solutions to complicated human problems that are beyond the capabilities of artificial intelligence. David Staley (2015) goes further and imagines a future Polymath University, which requires students to major in three disciplines that reflect differing approaches to knowledge and problem-solving (for example, accounting, physics, and history). Scholars like Staley and Aoun recognize the need that students will increasingly have to be flexible in their careers and to think nimbly and independently.

## **Student frustration with university rules**

We need to acknowledge, too, that however rich the intellectual and future-focused foundations that undergird interdisciplinary studies programs, some students decide to major in interdisciplinary studies for extremely pragmatic reasons and only after a long and complicated journey. Some of our students are individuals who are returning to their education after a hiatus; some are students who have been unsuccessful in the major they thought they wanted to pursue. Still others are people who have been made to feel unwelcome in traditional majors because of academic policies and practices.

What kinds of rules do we mean?

Requirements that students maintain a minimum GPA higher than the institution's minimum in order to continue to pursue a specific major

Restricting admission to courses on the basis of factors besides successful completion of the course prerequisites (e.g., restricting courses to "majors only")

Rules that prevent a student from declaring a major until they have completed specific courses and obtained a minimum GPA (in other words, rules that permit a student to amass credits before they know whether they will be able to pursue their preferred curriculum at the institution)

Course scheduling practices that limit the availability of seats in certain courses, making it difficult for students juggling family responsibilities and full-time jobs to complete major course requirements

Now, there are good reasons for many of these practices: accreditation standards, limited clinical placements, restricted funding, and staffing constraints, to name a few. Nonetheless, the impact of these policies is to discourage students from pursuing certain curricula as they seek their degrees. These practices may be more deeply discouraging to students who lack self-confidence or social capital, perhaps because they are first-generation students or from economically stressed backgrounds (Tough, 2014). They may perceive these barriers as amplifying their own sense of not belonging on campus.

For such students, a flexible interdisciplinary studies program can seem like an oasis. As they work to design their own plan of study, they can explore with their advisor their motivations and their intentions and the strategies that can help them reach their goals, often building on relevant credit they have already earned. For some of these students, their first advising meeting can begin with an angry question: "How can I finish a degree and get out of this place fast?" Gradually, they come to see the possibilities for their future academic path and may feel like they have truly found their academic home.

And from this home they see how far they can go.

## Our interdisciplinary future

Regardless of the journeys that prompt students to enroll in interdisciplinary studies programs, our universities need to acknowledge that these programs are going to keep growing and, moreover, that their growth does not represent a threat to traditional majors and academic departments. Interdisciplinary programs encourage students to sample widely from disciplines across campus, leading students to enroll in courses that open their eyes to new ways of viewing the world and organizing knowledge. In the process, they share their breadth of experience with our traditional students, enriching the classroom experience for all.

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[1] ours at VCU: <https://interdisciplinarystudies.vcu.edu/>

[2] career readiness competencies: <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>

[3] <https://www.collegefactual.com/majors/multi-interdisciplinary-studies>: <https://www.collegefactual.com/majors/multi-interdisciplinary-studies>

[4] <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined>: <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined>

[5] <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2015/11/the-future-of-the-university-speculative-design-for-innovation-in-higher-education>: <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2015/11/the-future-of-the-university-speculative-design-for-innovation-in-higher-education>

[6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html>: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html>

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