

The remarkable growth of interdisciplinary studies in recent decades has engendered both enthusiasm and skepticism. For the enthusiast, the spread of interdisciplinarity has not yet gone far enough; for the skeptic, its encroachment has gone too far already. While it is probably too soon to say whether, on balance, the rise of interdisciplinarity has had a positive or negative influence on the academy as a whole, now may be the time to raise questions about the future of interdisciplinary studies.

In practice, interdisciplinarity typically involves the integration of two or more disciplinary approaches in order to address common problems or to explore neglected topics. In other words, interdisciplinarity represents an attempt to redress limitations of the disciplines. In this sense, then, an interdisciplinary approach is often ad hoc. Even when they are not amenable to permanent solution, common problems can be exhausted. And the relationship between interdisciplinarity and the disciplines is a dependent one: there can be no interdisciplinarity without disciplines, and interaction among disciplines often results in reciprocal influence. But how sharply drawn is the line between disciplinary and

## FROM THE EDITOR

interdisciplinary, really? Regardless of its original impetus, an interdisciplinary approach may eventually be for-

malized into a more or less distinct methodology; a more or less discrete body of knowledge may emerge; an interdisciplinary field or program may evolve into something very like a discipline or department.

With respect to undergraduate student learning, the question to ask of interdisciplinary studies is whether they put the cart before the horse. The benefits available to a faculty member who is already grounded in a contributing discipline must surely be different from those available to an uninitiated undergraduate. But is the emphasis on methodology achieved at the expense of content? What does the student gain by using a combination of approaches that were developed within particular disciplinary contexts to explore a contemporary social, cultural, or political issue rather than the traditional objects of disciplinary study—and what does he or she lose? Using an interdisciplinary approach to teach science “through” complex public issues may be a good way to motivate students to learn, for example, but is it the best way to acquaint them with the rudiments of physics or biology or chemistry? Is problem-based learning the best or most efficient way for students to attain the broad scientific knowledge and understanding useful to civic participation and personal decision making? Or is the emphasis on social relevance achieved at the expense of scientific content?

As current trends do appear to favor the enthusiasts of interdisciplinarity, the concerns of the skeptics should give pause—especially if, as Ethan Kleinberg argues in this issue, interdisciplinary studies are currently at a crossroads.—DAVID TRITELLI

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