

Interdisciplinary Pillar team update, March 4, 2021

The Interdisciplinary Pillar Group has had excellent and invigorating discussions, plenary and interspersed with discussions by three breakout groups targeting different topics that need to be addressed for a summary report. Below, multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity are all captured under the umbrella of “Xdisciplinarity.” The group (or associated breakout groups) meets twice weekly, Tuesdays from 2:30 – 4:30, and Thursdays 3 – 5. Co-owners of the group are Ed Synakowski and Scott Henkel. Breakout group leaders are Jim Ahern (Organizations and Structures WG), Isa Helfgott (Stimulating Xdisciplinary Culture WG), and Jeff Hamerlink (Partnerships, metrics, resources). Gabrelle Allen is facilitating as well as participating in the Xdisciplinary Culture breakout working group.

With group members representing interests from domains ranging from STEM fields to the humanities and arts, including leadership from the Haub School and the Honors College, there is strong consensus of the value of interdisciplinarity. This value is not as an end in itself, but as a means to solving great problems of high import to Wyoming, the nation, and beyond. In the initial storming, a strong common understanding emerged, namely, that interest among the faculty in this domain is keen. There is plenty of stored energy and enthusiasm about Xdisciplinarity, a common recognition that it is essential that the university develop smart approaches for making this work happen and thrive.

While there is no shortage of interest, though, there are practices, policies, and expectations that clearly inhibit faculty, especially young faculty, from working across disciplinary boundaries. A most useful and energizing discussion was led by John Kaprowski, dean of the Haub School, where he compared and contrasted the moves towards Xdisciplinarity of Arizona State University and the University of Arizona, his former home. A point made effectively and crisply by John is that the obstacles that inhibit Xdisciplinary work are entirely of our own making, and can be removed by our own actions as well. In short, the point was made that we need to “get out of the way” of those wishing to engage in this realm.

Another item that has yielded discussion and strong shared outlook is the high value of a new graduate school as an enabling force in Xdisciplinarity, given its research and academic interests that would span the disciplines. It is recognized that all of the pillars have overlaps in the Xdisciplinary realm, and that cross fertilization with them, perhaps most timely being the Digital Pillar group, will be of value. Also, the Grand Challenges have been brought forward as subject cases, or “thought experiments,” around which issues surrounding operationalizing Xdisciplinary research and scholarship can be illuminated.

This week, the plenary discussions turned to Living-Learning communities and their role in introducing Xdisciplinarity to entering students. The group heard from April Heaney, Rian Rabideau, and Eric Webb regarding the concept of Freshman Interest Groups, how they work and what their aims are, and the prospects of creating such groups to focus on Xdisciplinary issues and opportunities, such as the Grand Challenges.

The plenary group has been divided into three working groups that have been working for a couple of weeks, each with a goal to further discuss and develop sub-reports in separate domains of the overall charge. These groups focus on

- (1) Organizations and structures for how to best carry out transdisciplinary work (Jim Ahern)

(2) Stimulating an Xdisciplinary culture, including through changes in practice and rewards regarding tenure and promotion (Isa Helfgott), and

(3) Stimulate partnerships; measuring Xdisciplinary success; refreshing Xdisciplinary enterprises, including sunseting them; creating resource streams to support them (Jeff Hamerlinck)

The aims of these groups overlap. Breakout group sessions have been interspersed the plenary discussions, to exchange ideas and refine approaches.