An Interdisciplinary Revolution: Remaking the Liberal Arts Curriculum

For many of us, interdisciplinary work is the site of the most exciting research in our fields. We are drawn to the energies and insights it provides, and we want to share that excitement with our students. Many students are double majoring, adding concentrations, or seeking interdisciplinary majors, and I think this reflects their interest in a different educational process and, inevitably, a different curricular model.

It seems to me that the structure of a liberal arts curriculum is incompatible with interdisciplinary work as we conceive it. In the Carleton curriculum, we want students to spend approximately the first two years getting a broad, liberal arts background — hence the distribution requirements — and then spend the final two years focusing and deepening their learning in their major, culminating in a comprehensive project that demonstrates their competence in the major by integrating its particular skills and knowledge in a project.

Interdisciplinary work instead assumes a sufficiently deep and focused background in several related areas from which students can create comparative projects. Despite our and our students’ interest, our current structure inhibits that possibility.

I propose reconsidering the way we structure the curriculum to create a first year and final year that are designed to create the option of interdisciplinary learning, and a major focus during the second and third years.

This would move the major somewhat earlier — which is already the practice in many majors, especially in the sciences. It would give students incentive to select their distribution courses more thoughtfully to create the interdisciplinary links that interest them. It might resolve some of our perennial disappointment with comps by allowing departments to conceive comps as a project that helps students see their major in context with other fields (as many of us are doing in our own work). Finally, it would make the educational process more logical: students would select courses that matched their interests coming out of high school (they have done broad, foundation work in many of their high school courses, and they are ready to try deepening their areas of interest) with an emphasis on creating links among a range of courses, followed by deepening work in their major, and culminating in reflective, interdisciplinary courses in the final year.

Questions: how would that work for the students who only want focus?
Could most majors move to soph/junior year? (double majors already have to do that)

Would this exacerbate the science/humanities divide — or create bridges?

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