We were at a crisis. It was the 2005-06 academic year. The School of Arts and Sciences, a small group of fourteen faculty in the liberal arts at Woodbury University, a school defined by professional programs in architecture, business and design, had no power, no identity, and no leader. Powerlessness was nothing new. With only seventy-five students (at a campus with almost fifteen hundred students) enrolled in three majors (Communication, Politics and History, and Psychology) and a primary role providing general education support in art history, mathematics, science and writing, we never had much influence within the university. A lack of identity was a new issue. Previously, as the Department of General Education (from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s), our role was clear enough. In the mid-1990s, we reorganized into a School of Arts and Sciences, created our liberal arts majors, and tried to become a more integral and essential part of the university structure, on par with the other schools and programs. For a number of reasons (lack of resources, lack of institutional support, and general disinterest in our aspirations), we had failed to create a robust School, and now we had lost our dean. She had resigned when her (and our) vision of our role in the university was challenged by the new academic vice president. Upon her resignation and return to the faculty, he had assumed nominal leadership and began to ask us, if our current vision was untenable, what did we want to become? He did not predetermine our answer, save to insist that it could not be the status quo. We had to change, but how and into what was left open to us.

So we began to take a hard look at what we actually did, at what value we contributed to the university, and what we might do better and more effectively. Our original investigations, led by a task force of faculty from within and outside the school including fourteen professors from such diverse fields as physics, communication, psychology, library science, history, biology, literature, and art history and done between November 2005 and February 2006, centered on creating something like an Institute of the Liberal Arts. We looked at models from several universities and colleges, principally Emerson College in Boston, Westmont College in Santa Barbara, and Wabash College in Indiana. Emerson has a wonderful Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies that bridges schools of performing arts and communication with innovative programs in their first-year experience and honors programs. Westmont’s Institute for the Liberal Arts is a fine advocate for the centrality of liberal learning in the 21st century. The Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College is leading cutting edge research and collaboration in assessing the quality of liberal arts education. All of these are valuable programs, but in the end we didn’t find a clear fit between these models and our university, although certain ideas found their way into our eventual design.

The Crisis in the Liberal Arts
We were at a crisis... http://web3.woodbury.edu/faculty/dcremer/advisoryboard/Transdisciplin... We also reviewed the recent literature on the crisis in the liberal arts. Although that debate, as characterized by Stanley Katz in his essay “Liberal Education on the Ropes,” has primarily revolved around the dichotomy of research universities and liberal-arts colleges, as a professional university we believed that the issues were still quite relevant to us. This was driven home when we read President Theodore E. Long’s 2005 “Convocation Address” at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. Following the argument in William Sullivan’s “Work and Integrity,” Long argued that professionals had failed “to act with integrity and to uphold their public trust” in a series of recent scandals, using their “privileges granted for public purposes for private advantage instead.” Personal gain had trumped public service, individual specialization had overwritten general learning, and the pursuit of individual profit had overwhelmed the public good. While we agreed with Long’s diagnosis, the cure of trying to integrate liberal and professional education had faced the perception that our professional colleagues, while agreeing in principle with these values, were pressured themselves by the realities of professional education to move farther and farther away from efforts at integration. Some other direction had to be found.

We came to the conclusion that the term “liberal arts” and the idea of “liberal education” had to be reexamined, especially within the context of a professional education. Long had noted that higher education had moved from the moral and intellectual training of an already existing social elite to the creation of the possibility of upward mobility for those below the elites, from the “nurturing of the mind and soul” to the “aspirations towards economic success.” We did not believe the dichotomy was so stark, so much an ‘either/or’ kind of difference. The liberal arts were more than elite studies of culture; they were exactly what facilitated, along with the acquisition of specialized skills, the entry of people marginalized by class, gender, and ethnicity into the lower levels of the middle class. In several ways this still fit our university’s students, who are predominately minority, lower-middle class and first generation. Economic and social mobility, the ability to earn a living while doing meaningful and creative work, and the ability to make informed choices as a citizen remain important features of higher education for us. They are, in fact, the liberating aspects of the liberal arts, but they required a transformation into the changed situation of the early 21st century.

The dichotomy presented by Long, between a purely professional education without an overarching ethos and an integrated liberal and professional education, was a false one. It was not a case of “either/or” but a case of ‘both/and.” The three professions generally taught at Woodbury (architecture, business and design) each have their own unique ethos, their own sets of values that distinguish the consummate professional with a well-developed sense of self and ethics from the others. Coming up with a comprehensive integrated model that all could adhere to would be a futile effort unless it engaged all participants and created enough range of freedom to allow the individual identities and ethos’ of the disciplines to emerge. In order to avoid the kinds of asocial, scandalous outcomes critiqued by Long, we had to move beyond integration to something more demanding and yet flexible. The second wave of globalization that began in the 1980s, the telecommunications revolution, and the incredible diversification and specialization of labor required for us the cultivation of more than interdisciplinary or integrative skills. They called for what we would find to be
transdisciplinary thought, the inculcation within us as well as within our students of habits of social responsibility targeted to their professions, of communication across various media and cultures that respected difference and yet allowed for understanding, of developing the unique integration of the personal and the professional, and of effectively collaborating and cooperating across physical, social, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. It was one thing to say we had to approach the teaching and learning of the liberal arts differently; it was another to say we had to transform not only our students but ourselves in the process. But how?

The Discovery of Transdisciplinarity

At the beginning of 2006, the university itself was undergoing a reconsideration of its identity as part of our reaccreditation process. A series of campus-wide retreats, including faculty, administrators and staff, had identified six principles that we shared as defining our educational aspirations. Included in the list of recognizable items (social responsibility, creativity and innovation, etc.) was a new term to many of us: transdisciplinarity. Now, many of us were familiar with such concepts as multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. In fact, we had recently inaugurated a new introductory interdisciplinary core in the humanities and social sciences, one that blended history, literature, philosophy and politics. But transdisciplinarity was a new idea. What exactly was this? What did it mean for us? How were we going to go about being transdisciplinary, let alone assisting our students to be? It seemed to be close to the ideas we had been exploring already, but was it? How did this idea form a possible answer to our crisis within the School of Arts and Sciences? How could it form a concept around which to build a new identity, a new sense of purpose, a new source of value?

This was the task on which we set out: to re-invent, or more properly re-imagine, ourselves as transdisciplinarians, as more than simply professors of liberal arts. First, we began to investigate and read the literature on transdisciplinarity. The more we read and discussed, the more we were intrigued with the possibilities. To put it briefly, we began to see transdisciplinarity as less a transcendent discipline and more as an environment and a process, as something that accepted the reality that, as Julie Klein notes following Michael Gibbons, “problem contexts are transient and problem solvers mobile.” The emphasis on praxis as transformative, on real-world engagement and constructive problem-solving was indicative of the direction we wanted to go. Many of us were sole practitioners, the only one at the university with our disciplinary specialization, or at most paired with only one other. Our ‘real-world’ at Woodbury had forced many of us to engage in all sorts of problem-solving that had stretched us beyond our doctoral studies and primary disciplines. We saw that transdisciplinarity, as expressed in the “Charter of Transdisciplinarity,” had also arisen in response to a world that was increasingly transgressive and had lost a unifying narrative of knowledge, a world that was failing to adequately address complex global issues and obsessed with productivity and efficiency alone as standards of excellence, an experience and a view we shared as well. We saw that transdisciplinary efforts in collaborative research and teaching, the use of computer-mediated and problem-based learning, and in confronting the challenges of that Helga Nowotny refers to as “Mode-2 knowledge production,” were directions in which we were already moving and the possibility of a fit between theory and practice became all that more intriguing.
Second, the academic vice president, David Rosen, offered to serve as facilitator along with myself of a strategic planning process he had derived from Dolence, Rowley and Lujan’s *Working toward Strategic Change*. It involved at first simply delineating our assumptions, aspirations and concerns about our school. Most of our assumptions were far from rosy: the challenge of globalization and new constructions of knowledge, the consequences of technological advance and innovation, and the demand to become dynamic, ever-changing, fluid and flexible. Our aspirations were noble: to become a vibrant presence in the lives of our students and our community and to contribute to the university’s and academia’s intellectual discourse. Our concerns were simple: fear of continued marginalization and doubts about our ability to measure up to the tasks ahead. Yet even from this cursory analysis, the idea of transdisciplinary seemed to fit. It was ambitious, cutting-edge, and unique and it seemed to hold answers to the questions behind our assumptions.

**The Making of the Institute**

We followed this up with a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis and a cross-impact analysis that matched up strengths with opportunities and weaknesses with threats. The first pairing highlighted the opportunities that reside in our home city, Los Angeles, one of the most diverse and energetic cosmopolises in the country, and the emerging focus on pedagogical and educational research among our faculty. The facts that the students we served were drawn from the richness of Los Angeles, and were seeking to build their futures there, and that we had already moved towards recognizing pedagogical and educational innovation and publication as equally valid to more discipline-centered research for faculty advancement, let us know we were pointed in the right direction, and a transdisciplinary one at that. The second pairing also highlighted the threats we faced, namely our low status and lack of a clear and powerful identity within the university. Thus we moved even more swiftly to embrace the idea of transdisciplinary, both as reflection of where we had been and where we anted to go, as well as a way to address our lack of identity and influence.

The result was a radical reorganization of our school into the Institute of Transdisciplinary Studies one year ago. Our mission is simply to pursue learning and research freed from disciplinary constraints. The two strictly disciplinary programs of communication and psychology have joined a new school of media, culture and design, leaving us with only two small interdisciplinary degree programs. Freed from focusing on majors (and all the pressures therein involved), we have been able to exercise leadership on campus in a number of areas. We have created a series of faculty discussions on innovations in learning, study abroad approaches, and interdisciplinary teaching (a necessary precursor, we believe, to transdisciplinarity). We have created collaborative relationships across the campus, assisting in the furtherance of our colleagues’ goals while also pursuing our own. We have developed courses in the SENCER (Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities) program. We have begun a unique honors program centered on a fellows program for juniors (complete with $1000 scholarship) that engages them in a collaboratively constructed transdisciplinary seminar on globalization. Most of all, we have successfully, as my colleagues now tell me, created an Institute where the members feel that they are doing something valuable and unique, where their stature within the institution has
been enhanced, and above all else, they have a distinctive purpose and role that is relevant to the entire community.
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