

# Interdisciplinary Studies at UConn

Many of the disciplines as we know them emerged as distinct fields in the nineteenth century. At that time, scholars put considerable effort into defining the ways in which their discipline's research methods, fields of study, and ways of constructing knowledge were different from others. These disciplinary boundaries remained largely unchallenged until the middle of the twentieth century when dissatisfaction with the fragmentation of knowledge began to grow.

The pressure for new interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship came from a number of directions. The opening up of the university to groups that had previously been largely excluded resulted in the emergence of new areas of scholarship, including scholarship on race, class, and gender. The end of colonialism and the intensification of global interconnections in the second half of the twentieth century pushed universities to expand their research and teaching in international studies. Rapid advances in science and technology (in, for example, genetics or computers) raised questions that no single scientific discipline could answer and often had implications well beyond the sciences. The pressing problems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries -- in such areas as economic development, health, the environment, and ethics and human rights -- have been problems that no single discipline can resolve.

Few would deny the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Yet at the same time, the seeming explosion of knowledge and the complexity of the world have required increasing specialization on the part of researchers. This ever-increasing specialization co-exists, at times uneasily, with the now widely-recognized need for interdisciplinarity. How best to build interdisciplinarity remains an open question. Scholars and students have sought to do so by integrating methods from other disciplines into their own work; they have joined with specialists from other disciplines to study a common question; and they have sought to break down disciplinary boundaries altogether, claiming a new "transdisciplinary," intellectual space.

Many of UConn's interdisciplinary programs emerged after the 1960s, initiated by faculty and students who found that disciplinary boundaries were obstacles to the development of new areas of scholarship. Often these new areas of scholarship challenged established methodologies and hierarchies of knowledge. Initially often on the margins, these areas of study were nurtured by groups of faculty and students and by programs such as the Individualized Major. As scholarship and teaching in these subjects grew and gained acceptance, they were often institutionalized in new, distinct programs, albeit with significant ties (through faculty with joint appointments and cross-listed course offerings) to existing disciplines. International (or area) studies, multi-cultural studies, gender studies, and environmental studies were among the most common interdisciplinary initiatives.