

# **Envisioning Interdisciplinarity in the Liberal Arts**

A White Paper  
College of Liberal Arts  
Colorado State University  
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Developed by the College of Liberal Arts Interdisciplinary Resources (CLAIR) Committee:

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This white paper aims to articulate the meaning and value of interdisciplinarity in the College of Liberal Arts at Colorado State University (CSU) and to promote interdisciplinary initiatives in this context. It outlines the historical, pedagogical, and institutional significance of interdisciplinarity; provides an overview of its current role in the College, highlighting areas of strength and of need; and presents challenges and prospects for interdisciplinary practice within the domains of learning, scholarship, and engagement.

We maintain the following key points:

- Interdisciplinarity has distinct value in the context of the liberal arts.
- Interdisciplinary collaborations and initiatives are essential to the preservation and promotion of the liberal arts.
- Supporting and nurturing interdisciplinary initiatives in Colorado State University's College of Liberal Arts (CLA) in the areas of learning, scholarship, and engagement will elevate our college and our institution while enriching opportunities for students, faculty, and the community.
- Interdisciplinary initiatives in our college would benefit from more visibility, coordination, and support.

Our central goal in this white paper and as a committee is to foster interdisciplinary practices as an opportunity for advancing learning, scholarship, and engagement within the College and the University at large.

## **II. DEFINING INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

In this white paper, we understand interdisciplinarity as the idea that complex problems can be addressed by combining the methodologies and insights of multiple disciplines to propose unique

solutions. This approach is particularly valuable in addressing the multi-dimensional problems of the contemporary world that inevitably cross disciplinary lines (Welch 2017, 88).

In general, interdisciplinarity starts with the premise that disciplinary boundaries of knowledge can place constraints on comprehensive investigations and subsequent solutions. The integration of disciplines can foster critical inquiry in new, innovative, and important ways. Key scholars in interdisciplinary studies, such as Allen Repko, Julie Thompson Klein, Rick Szostak, and William Newell, stress three key features of interdisciplinarity: complexity, common ground, and integration.

## **A Brief History**

Within the liberal arts, interdisciplinarity as defined today emerged in the 1960s and 70s through the appearance of various “studies” programs, such as American studies, women’s studies, ethnic studies, and area studies. These developments contributed to the establishment of the Association of Interdisciplinary Studies (AIS) in 1979, which aims to support integrative studies by “promot[ing] the interchange of ideas among scholars and administrators in all of the arts and sciences” (Association for Interdisciplinary Studies 2020).

Near the end of the 1990s, many universities, private foundations, and government agencies showed considerable interest in interdisciplinary activities. Stanford University went so far in 2004 to make interdisciplinarity a strategic goal in their five-year plan, focusing on research initiatives in human health, the environment, and international relations. Since then, many universities, including CSU, have mentioned interdisciplinarity specifically in their strategic plans. A survey of higher education institutions across the U.S. found that interdisciplinary-based programs grew at a rate of nearly 250 percent from 1975 to 2000 (Brint et al. 2009). Scholars agree that this recent manifestation of interdisciplinarity derives from and depends on disciplinary foundations as well as the specialization that comes with disciplinary research and/or intellectual pursuits (Repko et al. 2015, xxvii). Thus, interdisciplinarity should be understood not as a rejection of disciplinary practice, but rather as an additional resource for engaging more productively with and across disciplines.

## **Advantages, Promises and Clarifications of Interdisciplinary Cooperation**

Interdisciplinary research and teaching have multiple advantages. These approaches make us more open-minded to new ideas, and they encourage active and patient listening and understanding across disciplines. In addition, interdisciplinary understanding encourages mutual recognition of other disciplines as well as methodologies and points of view. Getting outside the comfort zone of a discipline also makes scholars aware of the limitations of their own disciplinary perspectives. Conversations across disciplines encourage creativity and innovation.

For every concept that becomes popular, however, there exists a risk of obscuring or diluting its meaningful application, and interdisciplinarity is no exception. In this context, it is important to recognize the challenges and limitations of interdisciplinarity and to respect its relationship with disciplines. Interdisciplinary work is by nature more difficult and challenging to conduct successfully than traditional academic pursuits because it requires expertise in multiple subject areas. This challenge is often best addressed through collaboration across disciplines, but such transdisciplinary collaboration involves challenges of its own.

It should be emphasized, moreover, that the rise of interdisciplinarity does not mean the demise of disciplines. Indeed, some argue that interdisciplinarity highlights the significance of disciplinary perspectives because it requires a heightened command of one's own discipline. As Gethman et al. (2015) put it, "In order to be able to be an active force in interdisciplinary contexts, a scholar has to be able to represent her own discipline confidently and with a clear, methodological self-conception" (90). Furthermore, it is important to consider what questions, themes, and topics will particularly benefit from interdisciplinary perspectives. Certain topics with inherent complexity, such as climate change, gender issues, human rights, food systems, and global health, are well suited for interdisciplinary research and teaching. Yet not all topics can or should be examined from an interdisciplinary perspective. Disciplines will remain relevant because of their command of certain topics and methods, the depth and detail of their focus, and their ability to inform interdisciplinary inquiries.

Finally, the term "interdisciplinary" should not be conflated with all trans-, cross-, or multi-disciplinary approaches. Just as the trans- and international do not necessarily represent the global, not all endeavors that involve multiple disciplines are truly interdisciplinary. Rather, this term is meaningfully applied to initiatives that actively engage and integrate a range of disciplinary perspectives to address big-picture problems.

### **III. INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN CLA**

Interdisciplinarity has distinct meaning and resonance in the context of the liberal arts. Here, it represents creative combinations and collaborations across disciplines in the social sciences, arts, and humanities to address multidimensional problems. COVID-19 is a perfect example of these types of wicked problems that demand an interdisciplinary approach and have relevance across the liberal arts, making this initiative particularly timely. The liberal arts, moreover, are in many ways a natural catalyst for interdisciplinarity. Liberal arts scholars regularly reach across disciplines to collaborate on broader issues; liberal arts courses include content, scholarly perspectives, and methods that extend beyond individual disciplines; and certain academic departments and programs associated with the liberal arts are explicitly interdisciplinary. Yet, the liberal arts remain organized primarily around disciplines. While interdisciplinary practices can and often do develop organically, they often benefit from intentional effort, coordination, and support.

Interdisciplinarity already represents an important and valued element of the College of Liberal Arts at Colorado State University. It is reflected in the College's Strategic Plan as well as in numerous current initiatives and practices in the areas of learning, scholarship, and engagement. For example, the College includes several interdisciplinary academic programs, offers interdisciplinary majors and minors, supports inter-departmental team-teaching efforts, facilitates interdisciplinary undergraduate research academies, and has recently developed a College-wide semester-long study abroad program at the CSU Center in Todos Santos, Mexico. The College houses interdisciplinary-themed teams of scholars, such as Latin American and Caribbean studies, religious studies, digital liberal arts, and the environmental humanities. It also supports interdisciplinary research through the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences (IRISS), the Environmental Justice Center, and through its stated goal to "develop partnerships within the College and across campus to enhance capacity to address complex issues, problems, and interests" (CLA Strategic Plan, 2017-2021). In addition, it offers a growing range of college-wide engagement opportunities for students and faculty.

A Fall 2019 survey of faculty in the College of Liberal Arts reflected this impressive scope of interdisciplinary activity while also revealing widespread sentiment in favor of increasing the College's focus on, and support for, interdisciplinary initiatives. The response rate was notably high at 33% and included representation from all academic units within the College. Of the 136 CLA faculty who completed the survey, 43% have been involved with interdisciplinary programs in the College (e.g., International Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts, or an interdisciplinary minor); and 24% have been involved in an interdisciplinary research group within the College. In addition, many faculty have interdisciplinary degrees, have held fellowships at interdisciplinary centers, integrate multiple disciplines in their teaching or research, or participate in interdisciplinary programs outside the College. Significantly, the survey also revealed that many faculty are interested in expanding or intensifying their interdisciplinary work. For example, 72% of respondents expressed interest in collaborative interdisciplinary team teaching; 74% in interdisciplinary research within the College; and 77% in interdisciplinary outreach/engagement. In addition, more than a third of respondents expressed interest in interdisciplinary collaborative performance, artistic collaboration, and participation on committees focused on interdisciplinary initiatives.

The survey responses indicate that fulfilling these interdisciplinary aspirations could be facilitated by increased institutional support for interdisciplinarity. A majority of the 136 respondents believe that an interdisciplinary center in the College could contribute to teaching, faculty and student research, professional development for faculty, creative/performing arts or studio work, and the development of scholarly interests. Written comments also expressed strong interest in community outreach and engagement through such a center. Additionally, the survey found that many faculty believe their departments could do more to support, incentivize, and reward interdisciplinary teaching, research, and service/outreach. Finally, respondents commented that constraints of time and funding often obstruct interdisciplinary work (e.g., course releases would facilitate the preparation of interdisciplinary courses); that existing interdisciplinary programs would benefit from greater staff support; and that the "siloing" of departments is a significant barrier to greater interdisciplinary activity.

#### **IV. THE WORK AHEAD**

There is much we can do as a college to improve, expand, and enhance our commitment to interdisciplinarity. We propose the following initiatives, some of which have been completed or are already in progress, and which vary significantly in the amount of time and funding involved. In general, we recommend pursuing a multi-staged approach to promoting interdisciplinarity across our college through the establishment of an interdisciplinary center within the College of Liberal Arts.

##### **Stage One (2017-2019)**

In the fall of 2017, we formed a committee with faculty representatives from social sciences, arts, humanities, and CLA interdisciplinary program administration. We call this initiative "CLAIR" (College of Liberal Arts Interdisciplinary Resources). Though the composition of this committee has evolved over time, our mission remains to investigate the potential value and feasibility of establishing an interdisciplinary center within our college. We intend for this body to become an advisory board to the CLA interdisciplinary center once it is established. Over the past three years,

we have made significant progress toward our goal. We have met periodically with various stakeholders, including the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Associate Dean for Research, the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, and the Council of Chairs, to share our progress and to gain support and input. In the fall of 2019, we distributed a survey to all CLA faculty, which aimed to investigate current interdisciplinary initiatives in our college in the areas of learning, scholarship and engagement as well as to identify areas of interest and need. The responses we received were extremely valuable in informing this white paper and our recommendations for the future. This white paper represents an additional result of our efforts as a committee. We intend to use the description of interdisciplinarity that we have developed here to focus our understanding of the meaning and value that an interdisciplinary center might provide to the College. We also are developing content for a CLAIR website to be hosted on the CLA website. By providing a central, virtual location for the presentation of CLA interdisciplinary initiatives in the areas of learning, scholarship, and engagement, this site will help to recognize and coordinate current interdisciplinary efforts within the College. It will encourage and support new collaborations by informing our community of available resources and opportunities, and it will raise the national and international profile of CSU's College of Liberal Arts.

The efforts of the CLAIR committee have paralleled the establishment of a physical hub housing three CLA interdisciplinary majors—Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts, International Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies—as well as affiliated minors (Global Studies, Legal Studies, and Women's Studies). The space, created in Fall 2019 and located in the basement of the A-wing of the Clark building, includes offices for program administration and faculty, shared administrative support, a mail and breakroom, and a student lounge and study area. This modest hub does not have the resources necessary to support the range of current interdisciplinary activities within CLA, let alone to foster new ones, and it lacks the physical appeal that we envision for CLAIR. However, as a physical space dedicated to interdisciplinary liberal arts programs, it potentially represents the embryo of a distinct and dynamic interdisciplinary liberal arts center.

## **Stage Two (2020)**

In spring 2020, the CLAIR committee began the second stage of our work. We brought to campus two specialists with experience in the administration of successful interdisciplinary liberal arts centers and interdisciplinary liberal arts scholarship at peer institutions. During their visit, these external consultants met with our committee, representatives of CLA interdisciplinary programs, CLA faculty, and other stakeholders at CSU. In a detailed report, they offered critical guidance on best practices regarding interdisciplinarity and on the challenges and potential value of an interdisciplinary center within CLA. We intend to use their feedback and insight as we continue to promote interdisciplinary initiatives in CLA and work toward the establishment of the CLAIR center. Over the same period, we continued to develop the CLAIR website and build interdisciplinary partnerships across the College. We hope that these developments will lead the Dean to issue a charge to the committee. This charge will allow us to apply successfully for CIOSU status (formalizing the establishment of a center), facilitate our efforts to seek external funding, and help to guide our next steps.

### **Stage Three (2021-2023)**

Ultimately, we envision the establishment of a robust and attractive interdisciplinary center, tentatively named CLAIR (Center for Liberal Arts Interdisciplinary Resources), within the College of Liberal Arts. This center will be rooted in liberal arts ideals, and it will support and foster initiatives that engage multiple academic units within the College in the realms of learning, scholarship, and engagement. It will reflect and promote the meaning and value of interdisciplinarity articulated in this white paper. It will provide structural and financial support for CLA interdisciplinary majors and minors as well as other interdisciplinary programs and research groups. It also will help to fund and nurture interdisciplinary research and outreach efforts. It will work hand-in-hand with other interdisciplinary initiatives within the College in a symbiotic and complementary relationship. It will promote communication, coordination, and connections among such initiatives and aim to raise their profile. It will distribute a monthly e-newsletter to CSU faculty listing upcoming interdisciplinary events and opportunities in the liberal arts, and it will assist in the facilitation and coordination of interdisciplinary events within CLA, such as panels, speaker series, and symposia. Finally, it will develop productive partnerships with relevant administrative and academic units beyond CLA, both within and outside of CSU.

Like the efforts of the CLAIR committee in general, the creation of the CLAIR center should follow a measured and deliberate phased approach. The first phase, which is currently underway, involves developing a central hub for interdisciplinary initiatives within the College. This phase includes the establishment of shared physical space and dedicated administrative support for CLA's interdisciplinary majors. Beyond the interdisciplinary hub, CLAIR will serve primarily as a virtual resource by providing information for CLA students, faculty, and administrators through its website and newsletter, and by encouraging creative conversations and cross-disciplinary collaborations. In the second phase, the CLAIR committee will work with CLA faculty, interdisciplinary groups, and other stakeholders to promote interdisciplinary partnerships, coordinate events, and generally raise the profile and potential of interdisciplinary learning, scholarship, and engagement within the college. In addition, our committee will apply for CIOSU status for the center and seek internal and external sources of seed funding. In the final, aspirational phase, CLAIR will become a robust physical center that will showcase and support the interdisciplinary achievements of CSU's College of Liberal Arts. It will benefit from a prominent and appealing physical space in a revitalized Clark building, where students, faculty, staff and other community members can gather, work, collaborate, and engage with one another. It will have SAU or department status, an administrative team including a director, dedicated staff, and a budget with sufficient resources for general operations as well as high-profile events and collaborative research. It will support and promote interdisciplinary initiatives among the social sciences, humanities, and arts within the areas of learning, scholarship, and engagement. In this phase, the CLAIR committee's mission will be complete, and the committee will become an advisory board to the CLAIR center.

Developing this center admittedly represents a major undertaking. But we believe that our multi-phased approach will make it not only feasible, but a natural last step. We will benefit from the current momentum of interdisciplinarity as a concept, the quantity and range of interdisciplinary initiatives already at play in CLA, the existence of relevant models at other institutions, and the commitment and dedication of CLA faculty. This center, moreover, will greatly enhance the value and recognition of our college. It will highlight the great work that we are already doing, and it will allow us to do much more.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In sum, the College finds itself at a pivotal moment in the evolution of our interdisciplinary programs and activities. Together, the faculty and administration have already developed an impressive level of interdisciplinarity that encompasses learning, scholarship, and engagement. Yet there is widespread faculty interest and enthusiasm for even greater interdisciplinary involvement. In this white paper, we have identified steps that could free this potential. Through these changes, our College community has the collective opportunity to enhance the educational experiences of our students, provide expanded professional opportunities to faculty, and find new ways to project the value of the liberal arts to a wider world. An interdisciplinary center could play a significant—even decisive—role in supporting existing interdisciplinary efforts in the College, developing new initiatives, and facilitating communication and coordination among faculty who see interdisciplinarity as a central part of their professional lives and a crucial resource for realizing the full potential of the liberal arts.

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