

News Release

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SUBJECT: University leaders issue statement on interdisciplinarity in graduate education and research

DATE: Sept. 10, 2014

Leaders of graduate institutions from 14 countries today agreed on a set of principles supporting interdisciplinary learning in graduate education.

The statement was released at the conclusion of the Eighth Annual Global Summit on Graduate Education. The summit, themed Interdisciplinary Learning in Graduate Education and Research, was co-hosted by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The global summit is an annual event designed to promote international best practices in master's and doctoral education.

This year's theme was chosen by an international steering committee to recognize that complex questions in a global society cannot be answered using a single method or approach. Master and doctoral students will be called upon to approach these questions as researchers, and graduate institutions are challenged to prepare them to conduct research and collaborate beyond the bounds of one academic discipline.

Summit participants shared examples and background on the national and international context for interdisciplinary learning in their countries and institutions.

Session topics addressed the organizational and administrative challenges to supporting interdisciplinary methods, including creating institutional cultures that value interdisciplinary learning; structures for interdisciplinary research and collaboration within science, technology engineering and mathematics (STEM) and the humanities, as well as across broad fields; assessment of learning outcomes; innovations in program design, including tuition allocation, credit requirements, advising of interdisciplinary students, and informal and extracurricular opportunities for interdisciplinary learning; and new models for funding interdisciplinary programs, including partnerships with public, private and non-profit funders.

“We tend to agree on the importance of interdisciplinarity as a concept, but practising interdisciplinary teaching, research, and learning presents real challenges for graduate schools and administrators,” said Dr. Noreen Golfman, provost and vice-president (academic), *pro tempore*, and dean, School of Graduate Studies, Memorial University. “This week we established

a set of principles to guide graduate communities when considering how best to incorporate interdisciplinary learning and research as core values in their academic programs.”

“The questions that will advance human knowledge often lie at the boundaries of current disciplines, so interdisciplinary knowledge and ways of thinking are central to today’s master and doctoral education,” said Suzanne T. Ortega, president, CGS. “It is essential that graduate students learn to communicate across disciplines in the full variety of contexts they will encounter throughout their careers.”

Participants in the summit included deans and other leaders of graduate schools and representatives of national and international associations devoted to graduate education. Along with Canada and the United States, other countries represented were Australia, Belgium, Brazil, China (PRC and Hong Kong), Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

The consensus statement is as follows:

Principles for Supporting Interdisciplinarity in (Post) graduate Education and Research

Interdisciplinarity is an important feature of (post)graduate education. Established academic disciplines inform and are informed by interdisciplinary scholarship. With a firm basis in principles of interdisciplinarity, students will be poised to succeed as the researchers, teachers, and leaders of the future. Diverse understandings exist, however, as to the definitions, practices, and purposes of interdisciplinarity – and these definitions themselves, along with the borders of academic disciplines, continue to change. Practices of interdisciplinarity vary, and may include extracurricular offerings and events, interdisciplinary programs or degrees, incentives for interdepartmental collaboration or co-mentoring, and problem-based research teams and curricula. Many stakeholders stand to gain from an increased commitment to interdisciplinarity, including university administrators, academic staff, students, and faculty, as well as regions, nations, and societies at large. Documenting the impact of interdisciplinary research and programs is important for accountability to these stakeholders, as well as for facilitating assessment and improvement of any offerings. Interdisciplinarity is not, however, an end in and of itself. Interdisciplinarity in graduate education and research must answer specific, identifiable needs. Representing 14 countries, the participants in the 2014 Strategic Leaders Global Summit recommend that (post)graduate institutions consider the following principles when making decisions about interdisciplinarity in (post)graduate education and research:

1. Articulate the added value of interdisciplinary approaches and initiatives within institutional contexts.
2. Communicate and advocate for the value of interdisciplinary research and learning to the broader community. Education efforts should include not only the broad value of interdisciplinary research and learning, but also the specific relevance and benefits to each stakeholder group.
3. Identify and develop the skills (post)graduate students will need to engage in effectively in interdisciplinary research collaborations or research projects throughout their careers.

4. Provide opportunities and spaces for (post)graduate students and faculty to meet colleagues in other disciplines, work on interdisciplinary research teams or on interdisciplinary research projects.
5. Build administrative bridges to encourage interdisciplinary research and learning. Where existing structures inhibit cross-disciplinary collaborations, find ways to remove barriers and provide incentives.
6. Value interdisciplinary mentoring or research in faculty tenure and promotion procedures.
7. Encourage funding agencies to support interdisciplinary research projects and training.

About Memorial University of Newfoundland

Memorial University of Newfoundland is home to more than 18,000 students, representing 90 countries and over 5,000 faculty and staff. The institution was founded as a living memorial to the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars. Providing a comprehensive range of undergraduate, graduate and diploma/certificate programs, courses at four campuses are enhanced by extensive online learning activities. Memorial offers access to the best in research, teaching and learning, and public engagement, providing world-class opportunities and contributing expertise and insight both locally and globally.

About the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)

CGS is an organization of over 500 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada engaged in graduate education, research and the preparation of candidates for advanced degrees. Among U.S. institutions, CGS members award 92 per cent of doctoral degrees and 78 per cent of master's degrees. The organization's mission is to improve and advance graduate education, which it accomplishes through advocacy in the federal policy arena, research and the development and dissemination of best practices.

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