

Being a Geographer in a Blended Department: Views from a Multidisciplinary Perspective

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline the challenges and opportunities found in being a geographer in a blended multidisciplinary department or program. The experiences highlighted in this paper are modified from personal experiences of the author as well as geographer colleagues within the United States and are situated in the literature on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs. This paper is written not as the final thesis on geographers in blended departments but instead is written as a starting point for dialogue and discussion on the role of geographers in multidisciplinary programs. Though multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary are not synonymous, for the purposes of this paper both literatures are drawn upon since both offer insights to geographers not residing in “pure” geography departments.

Though the literature touting multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary activities has grown steadily, the literature on faculty associated with multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs in the social sciences is small. This essay on healthy departments will briefly highlight three of many potential aspects of day-to-day interactivity within a multidisciplinary department.

The university is composed of discrete units called disciplines and/or departments. A department has its own set of rules, modes and tropes of understanding. These disciplinary departments are wrestled together into what are perceived to be similar groups called colleges. However, from university to university, different departments, especially those in the social sciences, appear in different colleges, some within “sciences” other clustered with humanities and still others within colleges of social science. Most faculty within a department have a terminal degree in that discipline. For example, a department of Economics is usually populated by a mix of professors, all with terminal degrees in Economics. Departments are held together by a common basis of understanding including what the discipline is about, a common history, journals in which to publish, conferences to attend, and so forth. Moreover, each Ph.D. in the department was educated at another Ph.D. granting institution within a department focused on that discipline. This means that during a Ph.D. program, all future professors are indoctrinated into the rules, history, behaviors, and assumptions of that discipline and carry those forward when they reach the department that hires them as a professor, creating a bond between people with the same discipline-based terminal degree within and across many universities (Golde and Gallagher 1999).

Entrenchment of departments within university structures makes it more difficult to dissolve departments than to create new ones. Dissolving departments means that something must be done with tenured faculty members within that department. Sometimes the alternative is to merge two departments together in the hope of stemming additional losses or ideally finding synergies to allow some capacity for growth. Additionally there is a high level of skepticism in the creation of new departments,

especially those without a solid foundation of historical and disciplinary trappings as traditional departments. The creation of a new department implies that the fixed pie of money to departments, including faculty lines, must necessarily now include one more department that will be hungry for resources, thus potentially cannibalizing the existing and entrenched departments. All of these facets challenge the establishment of new multidisciplinary departments, especially at larger research institutions. As such, Straus (1973) states that the “formal organization exerts great force toward maintaining the status quo and is a major barrier to any change in the traditional and entrenched departmentalization of academic activity” (p. 182)

It is interesting to note that smaller colleges and universities often have multidisciplinary departments. Departments, due to the smaller size of the campus and thus smaller faculty size, are often composed of humanities faculty and/or social science faculty. Conversely, large research universities which historically have large faculty numbers produce interdisciplinary programs, but usually not at the department level. Large universities instead produce interdisciplinary programs, composed of multidisciplinary faculty most notably in Women’s Studies, African-American Studies, American Studies, and more recently Internet/Web studies (Allen and Kitch 1998; Friedman 1998).

Assumptions of good scholarship

Highlighted earlier, each new Ph.D. in geography has been indoctrinated in a research university which more than likely has a “pure” disciplinary department composed of geographers. Therefore, during the multiple years of a doctoral program the student is immersed in all things geography including which journals to read, which to publish in, and to attend and present at the Association of American Geographers annual meeting and select regional meetings. Depending upon the mix of the department, certain research topics and foci will be prevalent (GIS, human, physical, etc.) as will certain theories, methodologies and epistemologies. Most new Ph.D.s will carry these experiences with them to a new department, and with acculturation, will add it to the existing body of knowledge and experience in the new geography department creating a type of cross fertilization for the discipline.

There are ample challenges of assumptions of scholarship within geography with its myriad of specialty areas. Interdisciplinary departments have the same challenge but at a larger scale. Social science disciplines straddle the area between the natural sciences and the humanities. Historically in the sciences faculty publish in journals and seek external funding for their research work. The humanities, however, focus premium attention to the monograph as the demonstration of active and productive scholarship with less emphasis on journal articles and external funding. Social science disciplines, and individual social science departments, have chosen a position along this spectrum with most geography departments closer to the science model rather than the humanities model. However, other social sciences, such as sociology and political science, have adopted models closer to that of history and English rather than physics and biology. Therefore, when a multidisciplinary department or program is created which has the power of tenure and promotion vested within it, knowledge of assumptions of good scholarship become paramount. As Finger and Rosner (2001) state “a healthy skepticism attends the growth

of interdisciplinarity, as critics wonder how interdisciplinary aims and methodologies should be distinguished from those of the disciplines, and dispute the terms of intellectually responsible interdisciplinary practice” (p. 501). The authors continue, “[i]nterdisciplinarity can also carry career risks, especially for the beginning scholar: few evaluative criteria exist for interdisciplinary research...and job descriptions are often tailored to the disciplines” (2001, p. 501).

To address the issues of good scholarship and counter challenges to multidisciplinary scholars and scholarship, key questions that a geographer should ask of their multidisciplinary colleagues include:

- a. Is there a written tenure and promotion document in place that spells out expectations of scholarship?
- b. Does the program/department place a stronger emphasis on monographs or journal articles?
- c. What is the relative value of a monograph to journal articles (how many journal articles does a book count)?
- d. Is qualitative or quantitative (or mixed) research regarded more highly by the department?
- e. Are there key journals, disciplinary or interdisciplinary, that the department desires its faculty to publish in?
- f. Are there certain presses where monographs should be published?

These questions and associated written responses will go far to offer clear guide posts and a map for the geographer interacting in a blended departmental environment.

Pay differentials and implications

Not all professorships in the social science disciplines pay the same. Upon examining the average faculty salaries from the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* annual report (2006) depending upon the discipline the average new assistant professor range for salaries in the social science disciplines can vary up to \$35,000 per year. Not only does this number appear to be large on the surface, the realities of these numbers and their social implication are both large and real. For example, a hypothetical multidisciplinary department could have the following mix of disciplines involved: Economics, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, and Communication. Of these five disciplines, the economist would earn the most at or near \$80,000 per year starting, with the geographer just under \$50,000 per year, and the political scientist at the bottom at \$45,000. If the chair of the department is a political scientist, full professor, his/her salary would be near \$83,000 per year, just above the starting pay for freshly minted Ph.D. in economics. In an ideal world everyone would accept each person and each person's pay rate as a byproduct of the Ph.D. subject matter they earned. However, the reality is not always idyllic.

Let's examine the differential pay rates in action. Imagine that a state university was given a block grant of pay raises for the university faculty and staff. The charge was passed from the administration to the deans and down to the department chairs on how best to evaluate and offer the pay raise for the faculty. A committee in the department

was created to examine the best method of distributing the salary increases. Two factions emerge from the committee, one of a flat pay rate and the other of a percentage pay raise. The flat rate group articulates that pay raises have been few and far between, that we have many senior faculty that have not kept up with other salaries; therefore, for equity reasons, everyone should receive a flat pay increase of \$3,000 each. The other faction suggests that pay raises, if not based on merit, should be distributed evenly but as a percentage, not as a flat rate. A flat rate would benefit the lowest paid and arbitrarily punish the highest paid (see table below).

Who	Base pay	Flat pay raise	New base pay
Faculty member #1	\$45,000	\$3000	\$48,000
Faculty member #2	\$55,000	\$3000	\$58,000
Faculty member #3	\$85,000	\$3000	\$88,000

Who	Base pay 9-months	% pay raise	New base pay
Faculty member #1	\$45,000	4.87% (\$2192)	\$47,192
Faculty member #2	\$55,000	4.87% (\$2679)	\$57,679
Faculty member #3	\$85,000	4.87% (\$4140)	\$89,140

Who	Base flat raise	Base % raise	Difference
Faculty member #1	\$48,000	\$47,192	\$ 809
Faculty member #2	\$58,000	\$57,679	\$ 322
Faculty member #3	\$88,000	\$89,140	-\$1,140

Each faction has a personal vested interest for a different way to structure faculty pay raises since each method provides a different absolute amount of pay raise. Additionally, it is not just the base salary in play. Retirement plans and social security benefits are also tied to the highest earning quarters. The higher the pay rate for a faculty member the larger his/her retirement check. This is critical since people are living longer and the retirement period is longer, thus retirement costs much more than many originally anticipated. Added onto the length of retirement are the increasing costs of health care, so every dollar counts, literally, when it comes to pay raises for many faculty members. It is not surprising that many will articulate for their own best interest when it comes to deciding when and how to divide pay raises. However, difficulties of a multidisciplinary faculty with different starting base pay is intensified since each method of distributing money outlined above will mean that one party at the top or bottom will lose out.

Hiring new people, “just like me.”

Hiring new faculty members is a challenge in any department filled with only one discipline. Common questions of a geography search committee include “Should we hire a person to replace the person who has just retired with a specialty in cultural geography? Should we hire a GIS person since this field is growing, offers much in terms of external funding, and we don’t want to be left behind the GIS curve? Should we hire to meet our teaching demands on classes focused on Globalization? What about a critical geographer? A positivist?” This scenario plays out in geography departments throughout North America each year. When it comes to multidisciplinary departments the

challenges are multifold. Do you hire a sociologist? An anthropologist? What about another geographer? An economist? How does a department make such a decision?

Faculty lines are a valuable commodity since they grow the overall resource base of a department, making the department stronger and increasing the potential of the department to achieve existing mission and goals, create new ones, and bring in revenue in the form of new students and external funding. When a department has multiple faculty from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, the hiring decisions become more complex. Does a department hire an additional geographer? An economist? What about a sociologist? Should the department add another person from an existing represented discipline in the department or maybe find a person from another discipline not yet represented. Can the department leverage the existing geographer, economist, and sociologist to perform the total needs of the department from all of these disciplines? Can a lone geographer represent all of geography and its many nuances? Are there holes from one discipline that need to be filled? All of these questions need to be addressed when hiring in a multidisciplinary department. Not surprising, many faculty in multidisciplinary departments like to see more similar disciplinary-based Ph.D.s within their peer ranks. Sociologists like to hire sociologists, geographers like to hire geographers, and so on.

Problems with hiring new faculty within a multidisciplinary program or department become problematic when it comes to the money allocated to a given faculty line. For example, if a multidisciplinary department has specific teaching or research needs to be filled, they can articulate that fairly easily. A new professor to teach globalization, a class on women, or maybe a class on the subject of online communities. Many social science classes on new topics allow multiple disciplines offering valid and interesting insights, with no particular discipline being privileged. In that case, would a multidisciplinary department hire an economist, sociologist, or geographer to fill these needs? The answer too often comes in the form of how much money was allocated for the open faculty line. To hire an economist the open faculty line would need over \$80,000. If the line has that amount of money allocated, that would not be a problem. However, the sociologist in the department/program would point out that they could hire two more sociologists for the same faculty line, and that may be a better expenditure of the money, two for one in terms of productivity. Besides the inclination to hire a familiar person within a disciplinary field, there is similar pressure to get the most for the money spent. This means that in a multidisciplinary environment there can be downward pressure on faculty salaries as well as a built-in bias to hire the lowest paying Ph.D. discipline (all things being equal) in terms of teaching and research capacity. A lone geographer as the highest base pay of all other faculty in a multidisciplinary program or department may find him/herself the only geographer for a while compared to the lower cost faculty in other social science and humanities disciplines.

Collaboration with non-geographer colleagues

Being a member of a multidisciplinary department offers unique rewards in terms of collaboration from both research and teaching perspectives. Just as geographers often focus on concepts of place and space in teaching other disciplines have their own gazes

through which they teach their interpretation of the world to students. “Students are exposed to a larger knowledge ‘bank’ through contacts with personnel in various disciplines who have the use of expanded equipment and facilities” (Buffer 1985, p. 147). Team teaching, evaluating, or critiquing a colleague’s syllabus offers a glance into this different way of viewing the world affording someone teaching geography a new look at a phenomenon or possibility to learn how to perceive phenomena in a different manner.

Being a geographer in a multidisciplinary department does not mean that one must conduct multidisciplinary collaborative research. However, if one chooses such a path, there are benefits from such a path. After decades within a discipline many assumptions become almost hardwired into behaviors and assumptions of research. For example space and place matter. Communicating the importance of space and place to a social science colleague often elicits a look of wide eyed interest. This is because they were never disciplined on space and place, but instead had their own unique assumptions trained into them. Conversely, geographers often privilege space and place over other variables and processes. Listening to other social scientists offer their views of phenomena allow insights that those from non multidisciplinary research backgrounds may not enjoy over a career. It is from this multiple gaze vantage point that interesting research projects can emerge that tackle a theory, topic, or methodology from a blending of both geographical and non-geographical perspectives. Though the research process takes longer than working as a sole author and researcher, the benefits accorded to the multidisciplinary research include learning new perspectives and literature which outweigh the additional cost in time such multidisciplinary collaboration requires. Buffer (1985) highlights the benefits of multidisciplinary collaboration suggesting that an

excitement is associated with the influx of new ideas from the various disciplines which deal with areas that previously had not been thought of in the context of the individual discipline. The convergence of independent ideas is viewed as being more substantial than the ideas would have been singularly (p. 147)

Geographers, more than most sciences, are from a disciplinary family which is eclectic in its own ways. Besides the old binary definition between physical and human geographers, the emergence of GIS as a third leg of geography shows how diverse, (some would say multidisciplinary) geography is in its own right. Being disciplined in such a diverse discipline offers geographers a unique, easier, and more comfortable transition into a multidisciplinary environment than other disciplines. As a human geographer I can often communicate more effectively on research with fellow economists or political scientists than I can with physical geography colleagues due to the nature of my research interests, starting knowledge, and beginning assumptions of human behavior as the starting point. Therefore, geographers, more than most other social scientists, have the necessary disciplinary heterogeneity, to allow a successful transition into a multidisciplinary department or program.

Unique needs of a geographer

As a geographer entering the job market I educated myself on how to negotiate a start-up research package. I was surprised to note over the years many social science disciplines do not offer such packages. This suggests two explanations. One, that geographers, in terms of start-up research packages are more like the physical sciences in their needs and the perception of their needs from an administrative point of view. Two, that geographers have unique social science needs that other disciplines do not need to succeed. Examples of unique needs of a geographer include, but are not limited to:

1. Maps for classroom use and possibly a full map room
2. Laboratory space. This may be a physical geography lab, GIS lab, or other such lab.
3. Fieldwork travel costs. Geographers, more than most social scientists, spend a significant amount of time in the field collecting data which can be expensive.

Because the needs of a geographer include start-up packages, department chairs and administrators further up the line need to be aware of these costs. Moreover, if a geographer in a multidisciplinary department is afforded a start-up package, often calls of fairness and equity are soon to follow. This usually leads to all new hires in the same year or within a few years, in the department or college, to also be afforded a start-up research package, even if such a concept was not within their disciplinary tradition until they hired a geographer.

Conclusion

This essay outlines some of the challenges associated with being a geographer in a multidisciplinary department or program. The examples illuminated include scholarship, pay, hiring, collaboration and start up package needs represent a sampling of challenges and opportunities when a mix of social scientists is brought together in a department or program. The author strongly believes there is a huge value in multidisciplinary research and teaching; however, the idealism surrounding such ventures too often glosses over the hard realities of swimming against the disciplinary stream. By bringing these day-to-day challenges to light it is hoped that geographers in multidisciplinary departments are better able to identify and overcome challenges associated with multidisciplinary programs and departments thus leading to a healthier department.

Additional Resources

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