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Interdisciplinary Survival

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; academic motivation; University of Toledo (OH)—Honors Program

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In 1966, the University of Toledo Honors Program encouraged students to create their college curriculum. As a result, I created an interdisciplinary major in Russian studies. When confronted with different disciplinary approaches, goals, and values, students must think outside the boxes. Interdisciplinary studies generate critical thinking, flexibility, and creativity.

Russian language, history, and political science raised questions about the relationships between culture, political theory, and historical outcomes. The two-semester Honors seminar in Russian and Soviet literature (in translation) provided a point of contrast with the first book of *Anna Karenina* for third-year Russian. A translation must transcend both languages. Translators work as artists, not as machines.

The M.A. in European History came next. In my thesis, *The Martyrs of Westminster: Burton, Bastwick, and Prynne*, I argued that the Court of the Star Chamber's 1637 inquisition of these men resulted in the abolition of this kangaroo court by the Long Parliament in 1641. Again, critical thinking, creative thinking, and flexible thinking contributed to the formation of the thesis, not to mention its research and writing.

A major interdisciplinary breakthrough came in 1987. The Department of Language and Literature at Jackson Community College in Jackson, Michigan, hired me as an adjunct to teach two sections of English composition. Then they added Conversational Russian and Introduction to Philosophy to the repertoire. Except for Russian, all my courses lay outside the undergraduate major and the M.A. in European History. Juggling such a teaching load would have been impossible without an interdisciplinary background.

In 1989, an ad appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for a full-time Liberal Studies Instructor at Yavapai College in central Arizona. The ideal candidate would team-teach Western Civilization and Connections courses—one-hour, team-taught interdisciplinary courses on issues of current interest. For example, the program offered “Connections: AIDS: A Modern Plague.” Ernest Boyer’s “making connections across disciplines” both drove the creation of Connections classes and stood at the core of the outcomes desired by the Liberal Studies program.

After I applied, several professors interviewed me via a conference telephone call. Then, one challenge remained before I earned an in-person interview in Arizona—design a Connections Course on a topic that serves our curriculum. I had 48 hours.

“Rings of Fire: Paradigms of East-West Thought” flashed through my mind. Considering the countries and cultures on opposite sides of the Pacific Rim, my course focused on five areas: history, literature, philosophy, technology, and art. It would examine the differences between Eastern and Western philosophy; for example, the nonlinear approach of Buddhism as compared with the rigid logic of Aristotelian categories. Students would compare 19th-century American westward expansion with the simultaneous Russian expansion eastward. Wild West meets Siberia! The art module would feature Japanese woodblock prints and Renoir paintings, Chinese opera and Wagner, Kabuki theater, and classical ballet. The goal of “Rings of Fire” was to develop a synthetic, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary way of thinking to meld the best traditions of both civilizations. I got the job.

When I started teaching at Yavapai in 1989 as a full-time professor, interdisciplinary heroics commenced. The program featured six instructors team-teaching Western Civ I, II, and III. The director required that I deliver full lectures on topics outside of my discipline of history, for example, Aristotle, Scholasticism, Modern Japan, modern physics, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and existentialism. To resurrect the defunct college newspaper, another professor and I created “Connections: The Media and Society.” Finally, I taught “AIDS:

A Modern Plague” with a biologist and a social historian. Before I retired, I taught that course by myself—a one-person interdisciplinary professor.

However, the most difficult challenge I faced at Yavapai occurred outside the classroom. The Faculty Grievance Committee required me to preside over a 30-day grievance process. I called the social historian who chaired my search committee and asked him, “What do I tell them?” He advised, “Do not tell them anything. Instead, ask them how they would like to proceed.” With that sage counsel, I initiated the process. A satisfactory outcome awaited both the grievant and the administration.

My honors education, graduate school experience, and teaching at two community colleges demanded interdisciplinary thinking. Such thinking generated the critical, creative, and flexible capacities that ensured my survival. However, and more importantly, the existential crises facing humanity are connected—the war in Ukraine, COVID, and climate change. The world needs interdisciplinary survivalists to cut the Gordian knot. The future depends upon it.

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