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Interdisciplinary Campus, Interdisciplinary World: Reshaping Higher Education for the 21st century

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Interdisciplinary campus

Interdisciplinary world

Reshaping higher education for the 21st century

In recent years, interdisciplinary fields have increased in academia. Some, such as biomedical science and genomics, are pairings of disciplines that, through their combined knowledge, have created new fields with unique focuses. Others, such as urban studies and gender studies, combine politics, social science and history to create fields that educate the public and inform policymakers.

In her book, *Creating Interdisciplinary Campus Cultures*, Julie Thompson Klein, Ph.D., professor of humanities in Wayne State University's Department of English, argues that these and other interdisciplinary fields are among the most important in modern higher education. Through

recommendations and examples, the book outlines how academia in the United States can institutionalize interdisciplinary education and research in the 21st century.

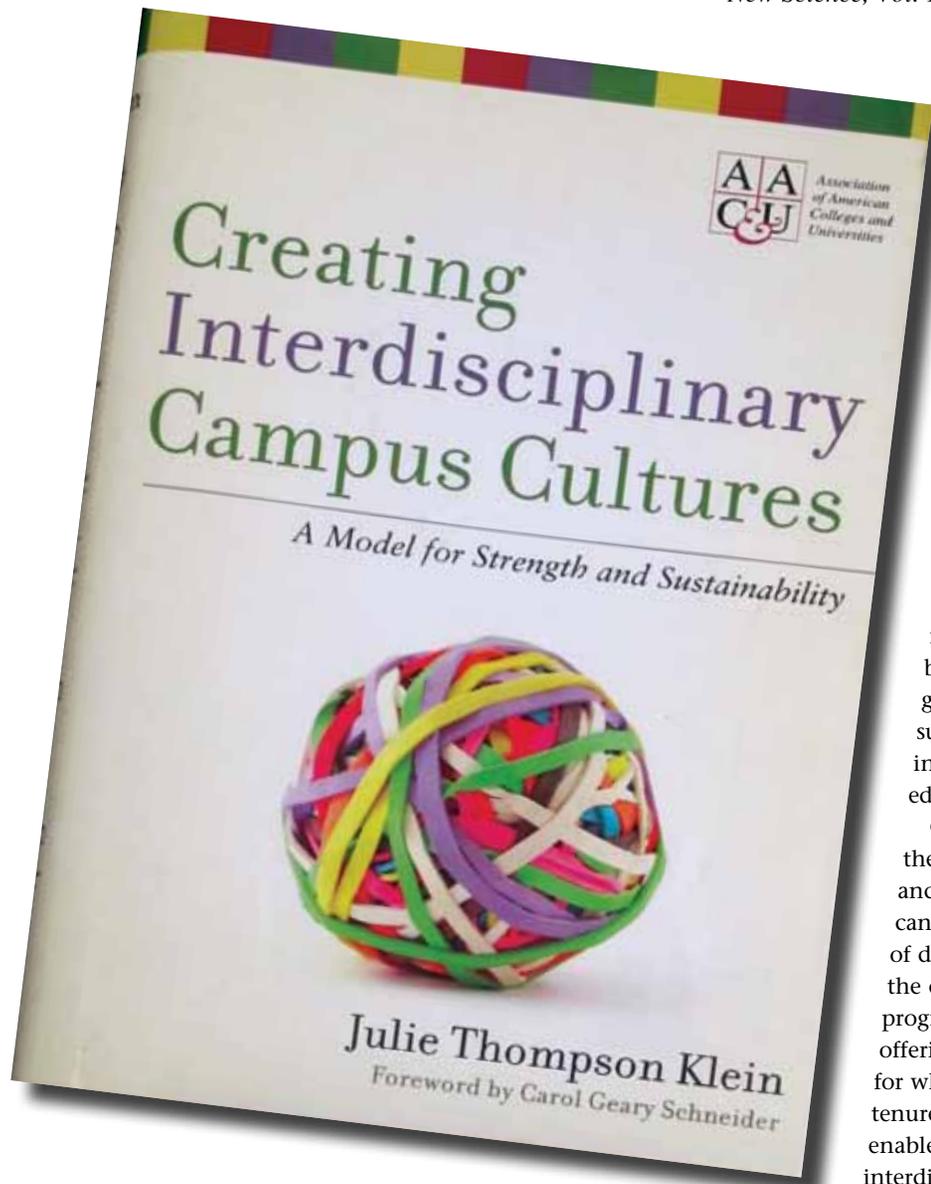
The need for interdisciplinarity stems from current global challenges. "In modern life, humans face many broad, large-scale problems, from health epidemics and global warming to challenges in renewable energy and sustainable agriculture," Klein said. "All of these problems are interdisciplinary in nature, requiring expertise from many different fields and collaborative efforts."

The demand for interdisciplinary studies reflects other large-scale changes as well. The

cultural identity of the country has changed as underrepresented groups have been increasingly incorporated into education and research. And, as sustainability becomes more paramount, environmental studies have become increasingly prominent.

These trends have led to the top 10 interdisciplinary majors at U.S. universities and colleges, according to the results of a 2006 survey by the Social Science Research Council. More than half of interdisciplinary majors are in international/global or area studies, including Africana Studies and Latin American studies. Two fields – neuroscience and biochemistry – follow a





“biology-plus” model, offering new possibilities in psychology and drug targeting. The most popular, environmental studies and women’s and gender studies, are also the oldest, having moved toward institutionalization since their birth as advocacy fields in the 1960s.

from different fields for common research and education goals.

Also important is implementing central oversight mechanisms for interdisciplinary programs and departments. While support from university leaders

Yet Klein argues that without cohesive, institution-wide support, many of these programs will not be sustained. “Today’s universities offer a lot of great interdisciplinary programs,” Klein said. “But without necessary structures in place, these efforts may be limited to being showcases or orphans.”

Klein has become an international expert sought by universities all over the globe wishing to implement sustainable models for interdisciplinary research and education.

One major recommendation is the restructuring of departments and faculty appointments. This can be done through a number of different approaches, including the creation of interdisciplinary programs and departments and offering joint faculty appointments for which researchers can achieve tenure. “Cluster hiring” also enables administrators to build interdisciplinary areas from the ground up by bringing in researchers

is essential, interdisciplinary units should have control over their budget, curriculum, majors and minors, and research focuses.

University presidents, provosts and deans can also strategize the layout of buildings on campus. “Research has shown that the further apart people are physically, the less likely they are to collaborate,” she said.

Evidence indicates that academia is recognizing the shifting demands of education. “The United States has a tremendous amount of interdisciplinary education going on, but these initiatives will see limited growth unless their universities prioritize them on an administrative level,” she said. “I am confident that the need and urgency has now been recognized and U.S. higher education can shift to meet the knowledge demands for the 21st century.”

About Dr. Julie Thompson Klein:

Dr. Klein received a B.A., M.A., D.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Oregon. She joined Wayne State in 1970. She is also a faculty fellow in the Office for Teaching and Learning, working on digital humanities.

To learn more, visit:

<http://csid.unt.edu/about/people/klein/index.html>