

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION PROPOSAL: Engaging Across Disciplines

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The multidisciplinary approach adopted by iSchools is a source of both strength and confusion. Novel research agendas and approaches emerge from the cross-pollination of ideas among students and faculty with diverse backgrounds, but situating such work within existing academic frameworks and publishing it in existing academic venues can prove difficult. Even in schools that value a diversity of disciplinary perspectives, disagreement about appropriate methods and standards of evidence can complicate collaboration in research, evaluation of students, and even promotion cases for faculty.

We propose a roundtable discussion of the pragmatics of multidisciplinary work at iSchools and, indeed, any organization at the intersection of diverse theories and practices. In particular, we will focus on discussing three key topics around multidisciplinary research at iSchools:

1. **Methodology** — How do researchers, students, and faculty select appropriate methods for their work? Is this selection really driven solely by the nature of the research questions? Does the Principal Investigator's background determine the methodology? When researchers with diverse backgrounds disagree about how to frame research questions or approach empirical work, how do they select a perspective or combine multiple perspectives to create a feasible research program? What best practices have emerged for selecting methods and for designing multi-method research in multidisciplinary projects?
2. **Discourse** — The manner in which researchers talk about research topics, studied populations, methods, and findings can present a formidable barrier to effective engagement across disciplines. What specific terminology and/or broader modes of discourse carry values and biases in multidisciplinary research? How can we maximize the efficacy of research discussions while preserving the integrity of ideas within disciplines and avoiding the controversies that can arise from discourse conflict?
3. **Publication** — What are the best strategies for writing and publishing multidisciplinary papers on topics of interest to iSchools? How do current publishing standards and venues present challenges (e.g. journal-focus vs. conference-focus)? How can those challenges be overcome?

Although these challenges are substantial, we believe that the vitality of our burgeoning field requires that we address them thoughtfully. As the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) matured, it came to favor incrementalism and reject more original work as a threat to its boundaries, a common tendency in mature fields (Grudin 2004). Like HCI, information science comprises diverse research traditions, and much of the value lies in maintaining that diversity and the creativity it fosters, even as the field matures. In this roundtable discussion, we invite iConference attendees to join us in taking initial steps toward this goal.

References

Grudin, J. (2004). Crossing the divide. In *Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 11 (1): 1-25.