A Framework to Guide Undergraduate Education in Interdisciplinary Science

Brie Tripp  
*Portland State University*

Erin E. Shortlidge  
*Portland State University, eshortlidge@pdx.edu*

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A Framework to Guide Undergraduate Education in Interdisciplinary Science

Brie Tripp and Erin E. Shortlidge*
Department of Biology, Portland State University, Portland, OR 97201

ABSTRACT
An expanded investment in interdisciplinary research has prompted greater demands to integrate knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. Vision and Change similarly made interdisciplinary expectations a key competency for undergraduate biology majors; however, we are not yet synchronized on the meaning of interdisciplinarity, making this benchmark difficult to meet and assess. Here, we discuss aspects of interdisciplinarity through a historical lens and address various institutional barriers to interdisciplinary work. In an effort to forge a unified path forward, we provide a working definition of interdisciplinary science derived from both the perspectives of science faculty members and scientific organizations. We leveraged the existing literature and our proposed definition to build a conceptual model for an Interdisciplinary Science Framework to be used as a guide for developing and assessing interdisciplinary efforts in undergraduate science education. We believe this will provide a foundation from which the community can develop learning outcomes, activities, and measurements to help students meet the Vision and Change core competency of “tapping into the interdisciplinary nature of science.”

INTRODUCTION
Interdisciplinarity has evolved from a “buzzword” to a necessity, with several leading funding agencies (e.g., the National Science Foundation [NSF] and the National Institutes of Health) calling for shifts from predominantly disciplinary-focused research endeavors to interdisciplinary collaborations (Rosenfield, 1992; Stokols et al., 2005; Masse et al., 2008; President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology [PCAST], 2012). These organizations have acknowledged that key issues facing our society increasingly require the integration of multiple disciplines to propose solutions to vital, complex problems like global climate change, loss of biodiversity, and epidemics of infectious disease (Stokols et al., 2008; Klein, 2015; You et al., 2018). On a smaller scale, the bridging of traditional disciplines has occurred to address complex research questions, often resulting in new fields of study such as chemical ecology, biomedical engineering, and sociobiology (Lattuca, 2001; Klein, 2015). These emerging fields of research open up new arenas where researchers think, act, and potentially teach beyond the scope of a single discipline (Repko, 2008; Boix Mansilla et al., 2009; Frodeman et al., 2017).

In alignment with funding agencies’ initiatives, the NSF and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) held a series of meetings that outlined a number of priorities, including the idea that higher education should be better preparing undergraduate biology students for an increasingly Interdisciplinary scientific workforce. A report from these meetings, Vision and Change in Undergraduate Biology Education (AAAS, 2011), charged the community to equip undergraduate biology students with an improved skill set that includes harnessing six core competencies by the completion of their undergraduate degree. The ability to “tap into the interdisciplinary nature of science” is one of these competencies. This competency may be challenging to meet for a variety of reasons including 1) the historical prominence of siloed disciplines (Klein, 1990; Moran, 2002; Repko, 2008;
Weingart, 2010), 2) institutional barriers that inhibit cross-polli-
nation of disciplines (Moran, 2002; Weingart, 2010; Scott
et al., 2014), and 3) ambiguity and discord on a unified de-
finition (Bennington, 1999; Lattuca and Knight, 2010). If insti-
tutions nationwide are charged with distilling this competency
to undergraduates, we must first have a unified understanding
of what the competency entails, the kinds of experiences an
undergraduate student might feasibly gain in interdisciplinary
science, what proficiency in this competency would look like,
and how to measure those expected outcomes. Simply put, the
problem of how to meet this competency and what to measure
remains largely ambiguous.

In this essay, we provide an overview of the challenges that
interdisciplinary studies have generally faced, address the cur-
cent state of academic culture as it relates to interdisciplinarity,
and summarize varying definitions of interdisciplinarity bor-
rowed from the humanities and the sciences. We then provide a
working definition of interdisciplinary science, derived from
both the literature and our own research probing the expertise
of more than 180 faculty members. We conclude by presenting
an Interdisciplinary Science Framework (IDSF), curricula that
align with the model, and an example of how to apply the IDSF
to a science course as a launch point for practitioners to develop
and/or assess instruction that fosters students’ ability to tap
into the interdisciplinary nature of science.

**HISTORY OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

The term “interdisciplinary” first surfaced in the early 20th cen-
tury, being used by the Social Science Research Council as a
bureaucratic shorthand for the promotion of research that
involves more than one discipline (Frank, 1988). Around the
same time, an increased interest in the meaning of integration
at the postsecondary level surfaced, with emphasis on develop-
ing the “whole” person through the general education move-
ment (Klein, 2005). Through the publication of a book called
Integration: Its Meaning and Application (Hopkins, 1937), ideas
of unity emerged but were quickly stifled, as participants in a
meeting held by the National Education Association concluded
that complete unity was impossible (Klein, 2005), clarifying
that deeper knowledge in the disciplines was more important.
This advocacy for disciplines dates back to Aristotle’s influence
in 387 BCE, when classical division of knowledge was enacted
based on a hierarchy of disciplines, with philosophy at the top,
physical and natural sciences following, and all other disci-
plines ranked by importance in a stepwise manner toward the
bottom (Moran, 2002).

Although hints of interdisciplinarity slowly continued to be
woven into research and education, little attention was paid to
the underlying cultural and societal implications of interdisci-
plinarity until the 1960s. Philosopher Michel Foucault, guided
by ideas from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, stated
that the separation of disciplines was not only a way to produce
and categorize knowledge, but also a sophisticated means for
“regulating human conduct and social relations” (Moran,
2002). Foucault believed that the hierarchical structure of disci-
plines legitimized and substantiated social and cultural power
differentials by advantaging individuals who had the financial
means to attend specialized, disciplinary training (e.g., college,
trade school; Moran, 2002). This led to certain opportunities
being funneled to a small subset of the population that had the
disciplinary training and skill set required to occupy exclusive,
high-paying professions (Katz, 2001).

During the Vietnam War and subsequent student revolu-
tions, a shift in the nature of the academic environment began
to take place (Repko, 2008). This shift edged toward Foucault’s
perspective, highlighting the limitations of disciplines’ abilities
to adequately address burgeoning social issues that character-
ized the period, such as the civil rights, anti-imperialism, and
feminist movements (Katz, 2001). Thus, a desire for interdisci-
plinary connections between disciplines emerged. Neverthe-
less, this enthusiasm toward academic and social reform
through interdisciplinary study wavered until pioneers in the
humanities, namely, Julie Thompson Klein and William H.
Newell, resurrected its importance in the late 1970s (Repko,
2008). Klein began to question what constituted legitimate sub-
jects of inquiry by examining the history, theory, and taxono-
Newell formed a professional organization, the Association for
Integrative Studies, and a journal, Issues in Integrative Studies,
to analyze interdisciplinary methodology, curricula, and
administration, both of which became a professional home for
interdisciplinarians (Repko, 2008). Following their lead, incre-
mental but consistent advances in interdisciplinary studies
emerged in the social sciences and humanities (Weingart,
2010).

In the 21st century, this mode of thinking is increasingly
being adopted in science, technology, engineering, and math-
ematics (STEM), as researchers struggle to answer radically
complex issues from a single disciplinary viewpoint (Pellmar
and Eisenberg, 2000; Welch, 2003; Masse et al., 2008; National
(2009) makes this clear in a “New Biology Initiative” aimed at
achieving solutions to societal issues requiring “the creative
drive and deep knowledge base of individual scientists from
across biology and many other disciplines including physical,
computational and geosciences, mathematics, and engineer-
ing” (p. 6). It further states, “Science and technology, alone, of
course, cannot solve all of our food, energy, environmental, and
health problems. Political, social, economic, and many other
factors have major roles to play in both setting and meeting
goals in these areas. Indeed, increased collaboration between
life scientists and social scientists is another exciting interface
that has much to contribute to developing and implementing
practical solutions” (p. 10). The BIO2010 report (NRC, 2003)
extends this need from interdisciplinary research to science
education: “Exposing today’s undergraduates to a more inter-
disciplinary curriculum will help them to better collaborate
with their scientific peers in other disciplines as well as design
more interdisciplinary projects on their own” (p. 2). In the wake
of this ongoing revelation, Vision and Change catapulted inter-
disciplinarity to the forefront of life science higher education,
by calling for students to tap into the interdisciplinary nature of
science as one of six core competencies.

**INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS**

In our intention to understand interdisciplinarity within an
undergraduate environment, we would be remiss to ignore the
university’s role in reinforcing disciplinary boundaries in
research and teaching practices. Establishing a productive
research environment can be an important marker of a
However, expertise and identity may fall short of being able to address the rapid changes in the life sciences (NRC, 2003, 2009; PCAST, 2012). Being cognizant of such patterns is important as we seek to conceptualize and assess interdisciplinary understanding from the perspective of our students.

Despite various barriers that departments and practitioners may face, interdisciplinary science programs and courses are increasingly being developed and championed through funding agencies, with local and national incentivization for interdisciplinary collaborations among practitioners and students alike. As educators, we can begin to navigate the landscape by first identifying the core meaning of interdisciplinarity.

**A CONTENTIOUS DEFINITION**

A constellation of disciplinary hierarchy, departmental silos, and institutional barriers has created the perfect storm for a fractured understanding of the term “interdisciplinarity” (Bennington, 1999; Repko, 2008). This lack of common ground can be amplified in the sciences due to jargon, professional norms, and practices that vary across disciplines (Fennell and Sandefur, 1983). As there is a perception that interdisciplinary studies emerge from disciplines themselves (Fuchsman, 2009), it seems appropriate to first define its root word, “discipline”: A “discipline” is a particular branch of learning or body of knowledge that can be distinguished by several factors, including the questions it asks via its ontological lens, epistemology, and methodology regarding how these ideas are used to contribute to a body of knowledge composed of concepts, theories, and facts (Newell and Green, 1982). Disciplinary knowledge can be a foundation by which we make sense of the world; however, each discipline comes with its own underlying assumptions and nuanced lens (Bauer, 1990; Repko, 2008). Exchanging those lenses for a unified eyepiece can require layered and intentional amalgamation of differing paradigms, which is by no means simple. As the borders between disciplines blur, epistemologies are challenged, which can in turn hinder integration (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Rogers et al., 2005; Fuchsman, 2009).

Another discrepancy surrounding the definition of interdisciplinarity arises from its undefined role related to disciplinary foundations. Moran (2002) describes this discrepancy as “competing impulses”—in one camp, the concept of interdisciplinarity is founded on traditional disciplines through a “wide-ranging total knowledge of a single subject”; in the other camp, interdisciplinarity is radically subversive to this—it seeks to answer questions that cannot be answered by the very disciplinary foundations that support it. Furthermore, the etymology of the prefix “inter” can have multiple meanings: between or joining (e.g., intercellular or intercalate) to being separated and lying apart (e.g., interval or intervene; Bennington, 1999). Bennington states, “The term interdisciplinarity is slippery: It can suggest forging connections across the disciplines; but it can also mean establishing a kind of undisciplined space in the interstices between disciplines, or even attempting to transcend disciplinary boundaries altogether” (p. 104). Bennington suggests that this obscurity is what gave the term “interdisciplinarity” a myriad of synonyms with other prefixes—postdisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, pluridisciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary are often used interchangeably with the term “interdisciplinary,” causing further ambiguity. This exchange of prefixes is directly reflected within the *Vision and
Change report, where the term “multidisciplinary” describes “interdisciplinary” practices in the fourth Core Competency, and calls for “cross-disciplinary” work to achieve connections between science and society in the last Core Competency (AAAS, 2011). For the purposes of this essay and to minimize confusion, we will use the term “interdisciplinarity”—the integration of multiple disciplines, leading to new ideas—to remain in line with the most common language and distilled meanings from national initiatives and literature. A more nuanced analysis of the definition is provided below.

Despite the aforementioned barriers, as researchers have taken detached pieces of information and/or tools from existing disciplinary frameworks—added, modified, deleted, or reshaped them to fill gaps of knowledge—new boundaries have been drawn, which we label as interdisciplinary fields (Repko, 2008). Sometimes, as mentioned previously, an “interdiscipline” becomes disciplinary in nature, such as sociobiology or biochemistry (Klein, 2000), creating a cyclical loop from disciplinary-to-interdisciplinary-to-new disciplinary fields. It takes time for a field to gain enough momentum to become a new discipline (Lattuca, 2001, Klein, 2005). Interdisciplinarity is a process—not an outcome—perhaps explaining slow recognition and adoption by disciplinary purists on the meaning and value of interdisciplinary studies.

PROPOSED RESOLUTIONS
The Disciplines’ Definitions
Despite the historical, institutional, and etymological barriers surrounding interdisciplinary endeavors, literature in the social sciences and natural/physical sciences has attempted to define interdisciplinarity. “Interdisciplinary understanding” has been defined in social sciences as “the capacity to integrate knowledge and modes of thinking in two or more disciplines or established areas of expertise to produce a cognitive advancement—such as explaining a phenomenon, solving a problem, or creating a product—in ways that would have been impossible or unlikely through single disciplinary means” (Boix Mansilla et al., 2000, p. 219).

The NSF has accepted the definition of “interdisciplinary research” set forth in a report from the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine (NASEM, 2005): “Interdisciplinary research is a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice” (p. 2). The main difference between these two definitions resides in their objective—the former describes a way of understanding, while the latter involves the application of interdisciplinary research.

The Faculty’s Definition
As the above definitions are derived from interdisciplinary understanding in the social sciences and interdisciplinary research in the natural and physical sciences, respectively, we sought for a definition targeted toward what interdisciplinary science might look like in the context of undergraduate science students. Current higher education faculty are on the frontline of planting the seeds for science students to start thinking inter-disciplinarily. Yet there is little understanding of how faculty conceptualize interdisciplinary science from either the research perspective or the pedagogical perspective. To establish a universal definition addressing both of these aspects, we collected multiple definitions of “interdisciplinary science” by surveying faculty across scientific disciplines and departments, asking, “How do you define interdisciplinary science?” (see the Supplemental Material for sample demographics). Three researchers (including B.T.) conducted content analysis of 184 open-ended survey responses resulting in six salient themes (Table 1). Interrater reliability of >80% was obtained through multiple iterations of prevalent themes on 80 responses, resulting in a final codebook. All three researchers then equally divided the remaining 104 responses and coded them based on thematic identification. As a final check for coding consistency, an additional researcher unrelated to the initial coding process, but trained on the project details and application of the codebook, examined all survey responses for accuracy of themes. We used the emergent themes and our analysis of the literature to develop a working definition of interdisciplinary science, with the intention of it being relevant to undergraduate science students and experts alike.

Five of the six salient themes from faculty responses offered definitions of interdisciplinary science that contain constituent parts from both of the previously presented definitions from the social sciences literature and scientific research funding agencies. A theme that was regularly included in our participants’ and NSF’s definition, but was excluded from the social science literature, was the idea that interdisciplinarity involves “collaboration” (Table 1). The relevance of this theme is supported by a study that explored learning outcomes for graduate students involved in the NSF’s (former) Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship (I-GERT) program (Borrego and Newswander, 2010). Using elements from the humanities (Repko, 2008) and an interdisciplinary social science rubric (Boix Mansilla et al., 2009), researchers compared I-GERT grant proposals with the rubric to look for interdisciplinary elements in the pursuit of developing interdisciplinary graduate student learning outcomes. Their findings provided a compelling argument that collaboration is an essential factor for interdisciplinary work in the natural and physical sciences. This should come as no surprise, as science is simply too vast.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Top six emergent themes from surveyed science faculty (n = 184) on how they define interdisciplinary science*</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Top themes among interdisciplinary science definitions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Involves two or more disciplines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of multiple/differing research methods/methodology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration among individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for other/additional disciplinary knowledge/expertise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having various perspectives, theories, approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses problems that cannot be solved by one discipline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Interrater reliability of greater than 80% was obtained.
Themes do not add up to 100%, as individuals made statements that were coded to multiple themes.
Interdisciplinary science is the collaborative process of integrating knowledge/expertise from trained individuals of two or more disciplines—leveraging various perspectives, approaches, and research methods/methodologies—to provide advancement beyond the scope of one discipline’s ability.

Aside from collaboration being identified as essential to interdisciplinary science, all three definitions are not markedly different from one another. This suggests that science faculty are indeed aware of the key elements involved in interdisciplinary science as defined by STEM and non-STEM disciplines; however, whether they are also developing learning goals related to this competency remains unknown. Of 184 faculty participants in our survey study, 45% (n = 84) did state having interdisciplinary learning outcomes in response to the question “Does your course have learning outcomes related to students’ understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of science?” With ongoing calls for interdisciplinary science efforts, it is important to determine how we can better support faculty to create and embed learning outcomes related to interdisciplinary science for undergraduates. Here, we aim to provide an evidence-based launch point for undergraduate instructors to develop learning goals and outcomes related to interdisciplinary science practices. This study was approved by Portland State University’s Internal Review Board #174219.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We leveraged the science faculty definition as a blueprint for developing a framework for educators to engage undergraduate students in interdisciplinary understanding. The theoretical base of our model incorporated constructs from researchers who suggest that students need multiple ways of knowing to address interdisciplinary understanding, including: a basic understanding of contributing disciplines (disciplinary grounding) and how the disciplines integrate to advance the solution of a question toward a common goal (advancement through integration; Boix Mansilla and Duraisingh, 2007; Öberg 2009). The influence of these two interrelated criteria, combined with the concept of “disciplinary humility,” gleaned from the environmental sustainability literature (Byrne et al., 2016), and “different research methods” and “collaboration across disciplines,” salient constructs from our faculty experts, formed the groundwork for our conceptual model: the IDSF (Figure 1). In the next part of this essay, we provide justification for the selection and inclusion of these five criteria we have found to be relevant to interdisciplinary understanding in the natural and physical sciences. By defining these elements, we intend for practitioners to conceptualize and identify activities and anticipated learning outcomes that foster and demonstrate students’ interdisciplinary science understanding. On a much broader scale, we hope that this framework serves as a platform to foster communication and collaboration within and between STEM and non-STEM disciplines.

Criteria Outlined

**Disciplinary Humility.** As students begin an exploration of disciplines outside their majors, developing a mindset, or epistemic perspective, that is infused with humility, inclusivity, and respect for other disciplinary epistemologies is a foundational criteria we label “disciplinary humility.” Disciplinary humility has been deemed a “prerequisite to and basis for transdisciplinary conversations and transcendent knowledge generation” (Byrne et al., 2016, p. 14). We have adapted and applied this phrase to interdisciplinary understanding—in order to work across disciplines, it is imperative to remain reflexive about one’s limitations in knowledge, skill, and awareness of personal biases (NRC, 2015). We encourage students to start this metacognitive effort by infusing disciplinary humility into their mindsets at the inception of interdisciplinary thinking, research, and collaborations. Doing so will allow space for respectful evaluation of similarities and differences between disciplines and among individuals.

We suggest that undergraduate STEM students can acquire disciplinary humility by making connections between STEM and non-STEM disciplines in relation to
real-world issues. Students should be given the opportunity to recognize how STEM disciplines constantly interface with society, policy, economy, community relations, and relevant stakeholders to effectively progress toward workable solutions (NRC, 2003, 2009; AAAS, 2011; Bamber, 2013). Longitudinal comparisons of STEM students engaged in interdisciplinary work that intersects with the social sciences and humanities have shown that these populations have more receptivity to new ideas, are more sensitive to ethical issues due to the exposure of non-STEM perspectives, integrate disciplinary insights more holistically, exhibit more humility, and “move beyond tolerance to a celebration of diversity” (Newell, 1990, p. 70). Likewise, we believe that the acquisition and growth of disciplinary humility has the potential to reduce the positive-feedback loop of disciplinary superiority and is therefore a thread that runs throughout the IDSF.

**Disciplinary Grounding and Different Research Methods.** As students begin their journeys toward interdisciplinary science understanding, a grounding in disciplinary knowledge must be present. The notion that a student should develop a strong disciplinary grounding has been recommended to reduce the risk of “a mile wide and an inch deep” or a “light educational experience” (Boix Mansilla and Duraisingh, 2007). We agree that, if no foundation of disciplinary knowledge is present, the ability to draw accurate connections between disciplines would be tenuous. Clearly, the depth of a student’s knowledge (on a novice to expert scale) in any one discipline will depend on programmatic expectations and vary among individuals’ past experiences and knowledge. Although many students do begin to develop robust disciplinary-knowledge platforms, requiring undergraduate students to be experts in any one discipline, let alone all disciplines involved, is likely unreasonable (Boix Mansilla and Duraisingh, 2007; Full et al., 2015). We suggest that being grounded in disciplinary content means that students must be at least provisionally knowledgeable in possible disciplines involved in a question or activity at hand, yet maintain accessible, deeper knowledge from a single discipline. For example, if a student/student group is tasked with solving a problem regarding declining bee populations, a plant biology major will have discipline-specific knowledge to contribute, such as factors influencing plant–pollinator interactions; yet that student may have less depth of (but provisional) knowledge regarding agriculture, chemistry, and climatological factors influencing honeybee populations. The NRC (2009) supports this idea: “The New Biologist is not a scientist who knows a little bit about all disciplines, but a scientist with deep knowledge in one discipline and a ‘working fluency’ in several” (p. 89).

Alongside the development of disciplinary knowledge, acquisition of different research methods can aid in students’ operationalization of how best to tackle real-world problems. In our search for an all-encompassing definition from faculty, the inclusion of different research methods was indeed a seminal theme in interdisciplinary science (Table 1). Reinforcing this idea, the Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research (NASEM, 2005) suggested that “educators should facilitate interdisciplinary by providing educational and training opportunities for undergraduates… such as data gathering and analysis, and research activities [connected] to other fields of study and to society at large” (p. 5).

We would like to distinguish research **methods** from **methodology**: methods are the tools and/or instruments used to answer a problem or research question, while methodology is the deep, philosophical assumptions and rationale for using said methods (Hyett et al., 2014). Undergraduates may not have enough exposure to philosophical or epistemological rationales for why certain methods are used, especially across non-STEM disciplines. Current undergraduate science curricula are often lacking ontological and epistemological underpinnings that govern disciplinary bodies of knowledge, contributing to students falling short in these areas (Lederman, 2007; Vázquez Alonso et al., 2016). But it is reasonable for students to understand the general purpose of using different methods such that they can create a tool kit of possible techniques/instruments that are appropriate from each discipline. To reach beyond a “grab bag” of methods, we encourage integration and collaboration between individuals who hold disciplinary expertise, potentially incorporating more methodological reasoning behind the selected methods.

**Integration and Collaboration.** Another criterion outlined by Boix Mansilla and Duraisingh (2007) was “advancement through integration,” which included the “capacity to use knowledge flexibly.” Students should be able to use previous information flexibly to create new understanding or knowledge, rather than regurgitating siloed pieces of information that were given to them. When students use knowledge flexibly, they can apply different pieces of disciplinary knowledge in a unique way that culminates in an outcome that would not have been possible through the use of one discipline alone. This means that students are not only collecting the appropriate disciplinary pieces of information and placing them in a central repository, but are also proficient at integrating—mixing, connecting, and applying them to discover new insights or ideas. A defining element of integration is combining disciplinary components into unique combinations to produce a product entirely distinguishable from its constituent parts. In doing so, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the individual disciplines (Newell, 1990; Boix Mansilla and Duraisingh, 2007). Students can best accomplish this by collaboratively leveraging different disciplinary chunks of knowledge, methods, and methodological reasoning to advance their understanding.

The fourth criterion, collaboration, is an interaction that complements and enhances all previous criteria and would likely help students develop disciplinary humility, understand their own disciplinary grounding, expand their awareness of the purpose of various research methods/methodologies, and achieve integration across disciplines. Although collaboration is best embodied through the practice of interdisciplinarity and the participation of players, students may not have opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary research and collaboration during their undergraduate careers, as indicated by an overwhelming call for interdisciplinary ideas in undergraduate education. However, we uphold that students can at least start thinking and preparing for interdisciplinary collaborations by identifying markers that make collaboration successful. A successful collaboration involves the establishment of common ground (Lattuca, 2001; Klein, 2005; Öberg, 2009). According to a National Academy of Sciences study (NASEM, 2005) on interdisciplinary research, “Researchers desiring to work on
interdisciplinary research, education, and training projects should immerse themselves in the languages, cultures, and knowledge of their collaborators” (p. 4). Scholars suggest that “newcomers” to interdisciplinarity, however, do not spend enough time on creating common ground, which leads to frustration, anger, inability to cope, and ultimately discontinued work. Ways to circumvent these barriers involve becoming aware of one’s own tradition (disciplinary grounding) and becoming familiar with traditions of other disciplines (content, perspectives, and associated research methods). Another aspect of common ground involves identification of commonalities and discrepancies (Klein, 2005): What are the terms/phrases and underlying assumptions between disciplines? Do they have similarities (meaning of electrical current in physics vs. electrical current in biology)? Do they have differences (meaning of heat in climatology vs. thermal energy in chemistry)? To identify these similarities and differences, each member of the collaboration must approach the partnership with an open mind (disciplinary humility) and an aim of integrating each contributing discipline to further advance the solution beyond the capability of a single discipline (advancement through integration).

Öberg (2009) suggests that the final part of establishing common ground is sharpening the aim of the research question or issue—this involves anchoring the approach all the way from the framing of the study or solution, to the choice and use of methods and into the analysis. In the evolution of becoming a team, individuals from both STEM and non-STEM disciplines can leverage one another to frame the study appropriately through disciplinary grounding, selection of different research methods appropriate to the research question or problem, familiarity with the general purpose behind certain methods and a deeper understanding of other disciplines’ methodologies, and analysis of how each discipline will be integrated to contribute to the whole. Through the ongoing infusion of disciplinary humility, these pieces can coalesce in an integrated manner.

Applying the IDSF to Curricula

To set the stage for students to understand the interdisciplinary nature of science, faculty will need to create authentic opportunities for students to think about and/or engage in interdisciplinary science. Here, we provide several examples of studies that highlight elements of the IDSF in their published instructional materials (Table 2).

When designing interdisciplinary curricula, instructors may grapple with the degree of appropriate integration between disciplines. Newell (1990) reviews several mechanisms to support varying levels of integration—from traditional disciplinary courses that borrow one learning objective from another discipline, to fully integrated courses that have no disciplinary divisions. Gouvea et al. (2013) provide a useful guide for instructors to assess what level of interdisciplinarity must be present to support the learning objectives of science instruction when designing interdisciplinary curricular tasks.

Many researchers recognize that students must be provided with baseline knowledge from contributing disciplinary perspectives, methods, and ways of addressing questions about the real world before they can successfully integrate those disciplinary pieces of information (Newell, 1990; Boix Mansilla and Duraisingh, 2007; Repko, 2008; Gentile et al., 2012). Watkins et al. (2012) highlight the importance of disciplinary grounding as they expose students to what they deem “disciplinary authenticity.” The authors contextualize how methods used by physicists and biologists can address similar phenomena in different but complementary ways. For example, they describe how physicists may employ concepts of van der Waals forces and capillarity action when investigating how geckos climb smooth surfaces, while evolutionary biologists may examine the anatomy of modern-day gecko toes and compare them with fossils of geckos’ prehistoric ancestors. Here, students were able to examine different disciplinary methods and concepts to better understand multiple angles of the same phenomenon. In a more heavily emphasized disciplinary approach, Gouvea et al. (2013) and Thompson et al. (2013) introduced interdisciplinary science concepts only after students had exposure to prerequisite disciplinary courses, as this provided students with firm disciplinary knowledge that could then be integrated and applied toward interdisciplinary problems.

The implementation of modules has been a popular approach to integrating physics and biology courses, as adoption of such practices is easier to embed into a course than redesigning an entire curriculum. Thompson et al. (2013) reports on the National Experiment in Undergraduate Science Education project, which integrates modules containing basic understanding of biological and physical properties and general scientific skills, such as modeling, problem solving, multiple scientific representations, and experimental design. Similarly, Woodin et al. (2013) provide an extensive list of 11 projects that feature modules and materials for specific courses that advance integration through different disciplinary research methods and concepts, including active-learning activities that involve collaboration across disciplines. The BIO2010 report (NRC, 2009) provides a comprehensive review of modules that support integration of STEM disciplines, as well as useful websites that compile interdisciplinary science education resources. Examples of project-based laboratories that compile different research methods from STEM disciplines are also covered, further elucidating the importance of interdisciplinary laboratory skills. In addition, a study by Full et al. (2015) outlines a framework for interdisciplinary laboratory courses that involved students rotating between “stations” of different disciplines where they learned concepts and research techniques. This was followed by students collaboratively addressing a novel issue by employing the different methods that they learned from each discipline.

Another common thread in the literature is an increase in the number of different disciplinary faculty required to develop interdisciplinary curricula. In particular, collaboration between faculty in different disciplines was necessary to correctly identify commonalities and overlapping concepts among disciplines (NRC, 2009). For instance, Redish and Cooke (2013) provide a case study of two faculty members’ efforts in developing curricula bridging physics and biology by acknowledging commonalities and differences, and as a by-product, an increased space for common ground and mutual respect of each other’s disciplinary domains were developed (i.e., disciplinary humility). This could be an opportunity to transfer these lessons to students: allowing students to work in tandem with one another, ideally students from different majors, could potentially foster disciplinary humility through collaboration.
In our curricular review, we noted a paucity of literature on partnerships and connections outside STEM disciplines, possibly for reasons related to the sociohistorical and institutional challenges of interdisciplinarity previously discussed in this essay. Similarly, there are reports of a pervasive attitude among STEM students about what science is and is not, deeply rooted in epistemic beliefs about what constitutes domains of scientific knowledge (Redish and Hammer, 2009; Gouvea et al., 2013). This often comes at the expense of non-STEM disciplines. We propose that changing these attitudes starts with faculty providing real-world applications for students to connect science and society.

Although the need for students to connect social sciences and humanities to STEM is not explicitly stated in Vision and Change (AAAS, 2011), it is impossible to address the complex issues of today without connecting STEM and non-STEM disciplines. Science instructors ought to inclusively teach science as it exists in the real-world—in constant flux between and within cultural, social, and political influences (NRC, 2009). Situating interdisciplinary science pedagogy in the context of students’ everyday lives (real world) can thus provide relevance and pathways to meaningful learning (Newell, 1990; Weber, 2016; Cooper and Stowe, 2018). In this vein, Newell (1990) recommends a topical approach to interdisciplinary pedagogy in which instructors design curricula through the lens of a relatively broad but singular, complex topic such as “energy crisis,” pulling on the perspectives of chemistry, physics, geology, biology, mental health, and community. These topical approaches not only provide an avenue for students to naturally integrate seemingly disparate disciplines, but can develop a level of disciplinary humility by recognizing the necessity of non-STEM disciplines. Similarly, to facilitate disciplinary humility more directly, opportunities for philosophical dialogue regarding other disciplines should also be woven into curricula. Eigenbrode et al. (2007) provide a toolbox of questions designed to marry competing philosophical aspects of disciplinary research and may aid in STEM students’ inclusion of non-STEM disciplines and their development of disciplinary humility.

### IDSF Curricular Example

To provide a concrete example of how to apply our theoretical model to a classroom, this section outlines a module developed with the IDSF through backward design. Backward design is a pedagogical strategy that intentionally aligns learning goals, outcomes, assessments, and activities (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998; Handelsman et al., 2007). We present a hypothetical upper-division environmental science course that uses a novel, active-learning pedagogy called deliberative democracy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Disciplinary grounding</th>
<th>Different research methods</th>
<th>Integration</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
<th>Disciplinary humility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full et al., 2015</td>
<td>Framework for creating interdisciplinary labs</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC, 2009</td>
<td>Examples of modules, teaching materials, interdisciplinary content and laboratory guidelines</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodin et al., 2013</td>
<td>Provides 11 projects that feature materials to embed in specific courses or modules</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gouvea et al., 2013</td>
<td>Framework for analyzing models, graphs, and essay questions</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentile et al., 2012</td>
<td>Examples and materials for integrating STEM disciplines</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson et al., 2013</td>
<td>Examples of modules that integrate physics and biology</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newell, 1990</td>
<td>Instructor guidelines for implementing interdisciplinary curricula</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weber, 2016</td>
<td>Examples of multiscalar topics that address real-world problems</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watkins et al., 2012</td>
<td>Examples of how to create exams and homework questions that use concepts and tools from biology and physics to address a similar problem</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redish and Cooke, 2013</td>
<td>Case study on instructor perspectives of disciplinary humility and collaboration</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenbrode et al., 2007</td>
<td>Provides a toolbox for facilitating different philosophical perspectives and aspects of research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to students being able to tap into the interdisciplinary nature of science (Competency 4), Vision and Change suggests five other Core Competencies that undergraduate biology students must cultivate by the end of their degree programs. Core Competencies 1, 2, and 3 are action skills that task students to 1) apply the process of science, 2) use quantitative reasoning, and 3) use modeling and simulation; and the last two Core Competencies, 5 and 6, are the ability: 5) to communicate and collaborate with other disciplines and 6) to understand the relationship between science and society. We hypothesize that, as students cycle through the criteria outlined in the IDSF, they are also likely to at least be thinking about the other competencies. We have made the case that once students can apply and use common scientific practices with disciplinary grounding, different research methods, and humility (Competencies 1–3), they may be well prepared to work effectively with others to solve interdisciplinary problems. As illustrated in our definition of interdisciplinary science and recommendations for designing curricula, communicating and collaborating with other disciplines (Competency 5) is an integral part of working interdisciplinarily, and is thus inextricably linked to the ability to tap into the interdisciplinary nature of science (Competency 4). And finally, Core Competency 6, understanding the relationship between science and society, is at the root of many interdisciplinary efforts. If scientific mandates require students to be better prepared to address the complex issues of society, providing them an opportunity to address real-world problems may foster science and society connections.

We would like to emphasize that only as students near the end of their undergraduate degrees would they become proficient in understanding the complete nature of interdisciplinary science. Therefore, we foresee that undergraduates will not fully harness all constructs of the IDSF just after completing their introductory courses, but additively over time. If students meet the criteria outlined in the IDSF, they will ideally be prepared to apply those skills to work interdisciplinarily. And if students are granted an authentic opportunity to work in interdisciplinary groups to solve real-world problems, then undergraduates will conceivably be meeting all six of the core competencies outlined in Vision in Change.

**A CALL FOR ADVANCEMENT**

In the face of challenges encountered in interdisciplinary science, the contributions of the IDSF coupled with curricular suggestions is a small, yet important, step forward in addressing the interdisciplinary science demands of this century. We realize that the deep sociohistorical challenges that may undermine interdisciplinary integration are difficult to navigate and warrant further review and additional research. As a starting point, we aim for the criteria in our model to provide helpful targets for researchers to begin to answer the more difficult questions that the IDSF poses: What levels of integration are necessary to develop true interdisciplinary understanding? How much integration must be enforced to solve real-world problems? How much breadth of disciplinary knowledge can be afforded before depth becomes sacrificed? What does disciplinary humility look like in the classroom?

The largest, and perhaps most challenging, question from this essay lands on the doorstep of academic culture—What changes must be made within academic culture to move beyond interdisciplinary importance to actually providing interdisciplinary opportunities to students? More attention to and
### TABLE 3. Example curriculum applying the IDSF to an interdisciplinary course assignment: Students in an upper-division environmental course are tasked to address the decline in honeybee populations via an activity and assignment in which they are asked to construct a proposal to mitigate this issue and are scored on the inclusion of the five IDSF criteria in their response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Goal: What should students know, understand, and be able to do at the end of the course/task?</th>
<th>Learning outcome: How will I determine whether students have met this learning goals?</th>
<th>Activities: What exercises will engage a diverse group of students in learning?</th>
<th>Assessments: What assessments will effectively gauge if learning goals are met?</th>
<th>Alignment: Do the activities and assessments help students achieve the learning goals?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will:</td>
<td>Students will:</td>
<td>Students will: (Deliberative Democracy Activity (DD))</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disciplinary Humility</strong></td>
<td>Appreciate how the union of disciplines can add greater understanding and that disciplines acting alone have limitations</td>
<td>Consider the limitations of one discipline</td>
<td>Research limitations of their role in relation to issue</td>
<td>Students were given the appropriate tools to research limitations and benefits of disciplines throughout the course and in activities and assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disciplinary Grounding</strong></td>
<td>Read and understand primary literature: know key concepts and seminal facts from each discipline with more emphasis on one</td>
<td>Collect relevant information from each discipline to establish background knowledge</td>
<td>Have different disciplinary roles in their assigned group</td>
<td>Students were provided with opportunities to examine how other disciplines are necessary to solve real-world issues through activities and assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Different Research Methods</strong></td>
<td>Know how to design appropriate experiments to address a given problem or research question</td>
<td>Identify appropriate methods from each discipline to address the problem</td>
<td>Collaboratively discuss how each role and methods will address the issue</td>
<td>Students connected the importance to science and society through activities and assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advancement Through Integration</strong></td>
<td>Understand how different disciplines are needed to adequately answer a question</td>
<td>Identify how each necessary discipline and associated research methods contribute to a greater understanding of the issue</td>
<td>Collaboratively mix the different disciplines and associated methods in a unique way that culminates in a novel solution</td>
<td>Activities and assessments required students to review primary literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration Across Disciplines</strong></td>
<td>Engage in collaboration</td>
<td>Be able to have productive collaborations</td>
<td>Identify the necessary collaborators and find common ground to work toward a feasible solution</td>
<td>Students were taught skills throughout course to develop disciplinary expertise as well as provisional disciplinary knowledge of other disciplines to address activities and assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FORMATIVE**

**Case study:** Students are tasked with solving a real-world issue.

**Brainstorming/discussion:** Students get into groups to have in-class discussion about a real-world issue and assign each other disciplinary roles.

**Decision making:** Students independently research issue from perspective of disciplinary role; then collaboratively discuss, complete, and submit (as a group) a worksheet that involves creating an experiment or proposal and integrates disciplines to address the real-world issue.

**Quiz questions:** Students are tasked with answering quiz questions related to active learning module.

**SUMMATIVE**

**Writing assignment:** Students are given an essay assignment that tasks them with solving a real-world problem unrelated to DD topic.

**Exam questions:** Students are tasked with answering exam questions related to DD module.
advancements in interdisciplinary science education must occur for us to answer these small- and larger-scale questions. Our hope is that researchers and educators can use the IDSF to begin to address these issues.

**CONCLUSION**

The ability for undergraduate biology students to “tap into the interdisciplinary nature of science” is relevant and important, yet challenging to understand and operationalize. Here, our intention was to clarify what this competency might reasonably look like as an expected outcome for biology undergraduates. We discuss interdisciplinary studies through its history, barriers, and multiple definitions, ultimately constructing a working definition of interdisciplinary science that can be applied to undergraduate education. We provide a platform, the IDSF supported by current interdisciplinary curricula, and an example from which educators can begin scaffolding elements of interdisciplinary understanding into their classrooms. Practitioners are encouraged to begin formulating curricula through backward design to meet criteria described in the IDSF, which we hope will be broadly useful for undergraduate students in all STEM fields as they move through their studies and into the workforce. By embedding the elements of interdisciplinary thinking and understanding into our undergraduate science curricula, we will begin to prepare students to effectively untangle the complicated challenges of today, ultimately tapping into the interdisciplinary nature of science. More broadly, and perhaps ambitiously, we ultimately envision the IDSF as a foundation for promoting institutional change surrounding the deeper sociohistorical issues embedded in academic culture.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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