

## Advice for Graduate Students on Conducting Interdisciplinary Research

Marc G. Berman

Scientists from different disciplines (e.g., computer science and biology) are increasingly working together to form interdisciplinary research teams and making some very important discoveries. Psychology is no exception, as an increasing number of psychologists are now collaborating with scientists from other disciplines such as neuroscience, engineering and political science to make exciting contributions to psychological science. As this trend is a rather new development, the mechanisms by which a graduate student can get involved in interdisciplinary research are not yet well established. So, how does a student begin to conduct interdisciplinary research at the graduate level? Let's take some advice from psychologists who are already conducting interdisciplinary research.

At the 2007 APA Convention in San Francisco, a discussion entitled: "*Conducting Interdisciplinary Research-A Guide for Graduate Students,*" featured a panel of interdisciplinary psychologists (Lois E. Tetrick from George Mason University, Elissa Epel from the University of California – San Francisco, and Baldwin Way from the University of California – Los Angeles) who provided advice and answered graduate students' questions regarding the best ways to successfully conduct interdisciplinary research at the graduate level. A summary of the information provided at this discussion is presented below.

Dr. Epel introduced the notion that the 3P's - Passion, Persistence and Pilot funds - are crucial to conducting interdisciplinary research at the graduate and post-graduate level. She stressed the importance of being persistent when talking to scientists outside your field about the connection between your research and theirs, because the links between your field and their own research may not be automatically evident. Dr. Epel further indicated that maintaining passion and persistence can help you eventually convince other researchers that collaborating is a worthwhile endeavor. Further, securing pilot funding for the project will also increase the likelihood of collaboration.

In addition, Dr. Tetrick informed students that funding for interdisciplinary research has recently been increased across many funding agencies, and attributed this to the fact that different funding agencies are more likely to see the relevance of such research. Examples of this increase in interdisciplinary funding are recently funded projects that propose exploration into the basic behavioral and thought processes through multiple different mechanisms including neuronal, hormonal, and genetic mediators.

Despite a desire to conduct interdisciplinary research, the idea of joining another discipline or working with scientists from another field can be quite intimidating. Dr. Way provided a personal example, explaining that he was initially intimidated by and uninterested in quantitative science, and majored in Government as an undergraduate, but eventually decided to pursue a degree in neuroscience as a graduate student. This decision was prompted by a change in his research passion and motivations. After he

focused his career goals on neuroscience, he became motivated to take more quantitative courses. Furthermore, once Dr. Way saw how these quantitative courses supported his research motivations and goals, the material became easier to learn and more interesting. In other words, classes that he thought previously would be “impossible” became very manageable.

Lastly, all of these researchers stressed the importance of keeping an open mind, being flexible, and going outside your comfort zone. Dr. Tetrick stressed the importance of attending talks and reading papers outside your area of expertise to spur ideas for new interdisciplinary projects, especially if you do not have a specific project in mind. By allowing yourself to be “distracted” by findings in other fields you are building a wider picture of how your science can make a broader impact. Finally, Dr. Epel closed the discussion by mentioning that there will be “randomness” in your career and that you need to have a flexible plan. In fact, a good interdisciplinary researcher will be able to use that randomness to his or her advantage.

To download a copy of the presentation, and to learn more about the Science Student Council, please visit <http://www.apa.org/science/apasscweb.html> or email [scistudent@apa.org](mailto:scistudent@apa.org). For further information on interdisciplinary research funding please see the following website: <http://www.decadeofbehavior.org/fundsource/>