INTRODUCTION

Philadelphia University, previously Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, was founded in 1884 in response to industry need for better textiles knowledge. Over 125 years the college grew to a university that includes programs in design, engineering, business, health science, and the liberal arts. In 2007, Steve Spinelli Jr., PhD, president of Philadelphia University, led a strategic planning effort. He recognized that students today are graduating into a world that is “VUCA”: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. VUCA is a term from military vocabulary that is increasingly used in strategic leadership in a wide range of organizations to tackle wicked problems such as access to clean water, sustainable energy, and health care, where multidisciplinary solutions are required. Spinelli subscribes to the belief that innovation rarely occurs as a result of the advancement of a single discipline, but rather that innovation occurs in the overlaps and “white spaces” between disciplines. As a result, it was determined that while disciplines and majors still needed to exist, the boundaries needed to be removed. The key mandate from the university’s strategic plan, focused on students achieving an innovation mindset, called for reorganizing half of the university into a new College of Design, Engineering, and Commerce (DEC). Spinelli searched for an advisor who could connect the thinking across the disciplines and bring a broader external network to advise the faculty. In 2008, Spinelli hired Heather McGowan, who held academic degrees in both design and business and had extensive professional experience in design strategy, product development, and business model innovation, to work with faculty.

After reviewing the learning outcomes (see interactive flash map⁷) from the academic programs in design, engineering, and business, we (the strategic planning team at Philadelphia University) found that most programs introduce
collaboration too late, with too few skills to facilitate collaboration (Figure 12.1). We discovered that the single-discipline focus, which may be ideal for entry-level jobs, created barriers to higher levels of career growth where the emphasis on discipline expertise lessens and the ability to coordinate, manage, and then strategize across functions becomes essential (Figure 12.2). We then looked at the spectrum of innovation from the formulation end of opportunity creation or problem finding to the delivery and optimization end of value delivery. We recognize the spectrum of innovation as defined by Clay Christensen from sustaining or incremental innovation generally centered around product or service improvements to radical, revolutionary, or disruptive innovation, which refers to innovation that requires a greater change either internally in the organization or external in the market (Christensen et al. 2008). Disruptive innovation can create new markets. We propose that incremental or sustaining innovation includes the development and optimization of products and services with a focus on solving known problems and that radical, revolutionary, or disruptive innovation requires white space discovery and formulation of new methods and processes, and entirely new value propositions. We found that both the disciplines of engineering and business emphasize development and optimization where design stretches further into discovery and formulation (Figure 12.3). We also found that the VUCA world requires greater exploration in the opportunity creation end of the spectrum. To best prepare students to collaborate in this environment, we needed to create courses and experiences that offered greater exposure to discovery and formulation in a manner that is connected and relevant to business and engineering’s discipline strengths in development and optimization (Figure 12.4).
With this in mind we identified a fundamental set of common connective skills and developed the first beta courses into what we called a core framework. This represents a common core curriculum for all students in the 14 undergraduate majors that make up DEC. The courses are designed to spiral through phases of discovery and formulation with tangible opportunities to integrate their growing discipline knowledge, culminating in an integrative senior thesis capstone. There are four courses in the core curriculum:

![Figure 12.2. Career limits of the single-discipline mindset.](image)

![Figure 12.3. Spectrum of innovation and discipline foci.](image)
• **Process:** Integrative Design Processes (IDP) introduces students to dealing with ambiguity and propositional thinking through finding problems, prototyping, and iterating solutions while working in diverse teams of students.

• **Methods:** Ethnographic Research Methods continues the emphasis on inquiry, teamwork, and dealing with ambiguity from IDP, exclusively focusing on people and behavior with unique insights into behavior and belief, the cultural construction of everything, and the concept of sameness and difference. Above all, the course emphasizes developing empathy.

• **Frameworks:** Business Model Innovation introduces students to the concept of how a value proposition is delivered to customers through infrastructure to create financial, social, and environmental value.

• **Systems:** Students then choose between Sustainability and Eco-innovation as options to explore their discipline expertise or industry in a more systemic way using nature as the most resilient model. Causality and complexity are emphasized here.

In building the ethnography course specifically, we sought to bring in a diverse team of experts: both corporate anthropologists with experience in real-world industry challenges and academic anthropologists, specifically those experts well versed in teaching anthropology to nonmajors and in diverse settings. Heather sought advisors with deep experience in anthropology from both academic research and applied corporate perspectives. She engaged Lisa
DiCarlo, who teaches applied anthropology, and Sarah Rottenberg, who brings a perspective on using the tools of anthropology for design research and has more than 15 years of experience as an innovation/design consultant. We offer our experience in creating this core curriculum as a conversation.

ANTHROPOLOGY IS A CORE SKILL FOR MANAGING AMBIGUITY

HEATHER: We had three primary goals in building the core curriculum: (1) to simultaneously prepare students for the jobs that exist today and the ones that will emerge tomorrow; (2) to prepare students to adapt to forces of change in their professions; and (3) to prepare students to work effectively in teams. Why did we decide that anthropological skills are essential in this common core to help us achieve those goals?

LISA: What I have gathered from teaching anthropology to business majors who go on to a variety of careers is that the anthropological perspective offers some unique insights, and these insights are important regardless of someone’s major or the industry she works in. People tend to describe behavior in terms of ideals and live it in terms of how they negotiate their conditions. Anthropology examines that intersection of behavior and belief and offers a way to understand why the two differ. When students start to explore examples of this in their own lives, it raises their awareness about how important it is to examine contexts and to question what they hear. In essence, they become more critical observers. Exploring the extent to which our lives are culturally constructed gives students a couple of useful ways of looking at the world. First, they develop empathy for other cultural worlds and may start to examine cultural differences in a more useful way. Second, they begin to look at their own contexts as systems that have developed and persisted through the efforts and beliefs of the people who came before them. If it’s that basic, they realize, then surely those systems can be tweaked. In other words, they become aware of how negotiable constructs really are. In the book Where Good Ideas Come From, Steven Johnson (2010) describes innovative societies as ones in which people have access to different ideas and can question existing systems (among other things). The implications of cultural construction are irresistible to ponder. Understanding that concept leads to raised awareness about how we differ and how we are similar in terms of lived lives. There are universal experiences and needs, and then there are context-dependent negotiations and solutions. Whoever gets this will be more empathic with respect to cultural difference.

Maybe the students won’t become anthropologists . . . what if instead they become politicians, ad reps, bankers, religious leaders, teachers of any discipline,
law enforcement, or simply community members with an anthropological perspective? It’s not just about how these methods will serve them in their careers. It’s also about how these methods will serve them in life. I’m okay with that.

**SARAH:** I’m not just okay with that; I’m thrilled by it! And I think bringing in anthropological approaches teaches students even more than empathy. It teaches them inductive thinking and pattern recognition, both of which are necessary to recognize that you’re in an ambiguous situation, to make sense of why things are changing, and to begin to identify how you can respond to that change. Students become open to looking for the unexpected through observation and immersion in new cultural contexts. But just finding new perspectives is not enough. Anthropology also teaches students to interpret their ethnographic data, to make sense of what they see. We teach inductive analysis techniques that work from individual bits of data up towards theories and hypotheses, which enable students to truly generate new ideas about how the world works rather than just confirm or refute their suspicions. They learn to recognize patterns, look for links between seemingly unrelated bits of data, and to probe behind what they are seeing and ask the question why is it happening.

A good example of how this works can be found in the work that Jump Associates did with General Electric Company’s plastics division many years ago. We were helping GE expand into a new market and started by spending time with potential customers in that market, employees and owners of small businesses for whom GE wanted to develop products. Through the course of our research, we heard several stories about play and experimentation. One person was experimenting with a new ingredient that he discovered growing on the side of the road while driving to work one day. Another had a mini-processing plant in his garage. A third was experimenting with the fuzz on tennis balls. Rather than ignoring these stories or poking fun at these quirky behaviors, GE paid attention to them and pondered the implications for their own business. In doing so, the team realized that to win business with companies in this particular industry, GE needed to tap into the culture of experimentation, and work differently with them than they did with other customers. GE needed to engage them creatively in the early stages of the product development process and partner with them to co-create new products. This new partnership made entering into the new market both less expensive and faster, as GE could tap into their partners’ resources and existing manufacturing capabilities instead of building their own. It also meant that the co-developed products were easy to sell, because they had been made alongside their customers. Noticing the pattern and correctly interpreting these stories resulted in GE succeeding in the new business earlier and with less investment than they had initially projected. Empathy and pattern recognition seem like soft skills, but they can have incredibly hard benefits.
PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY TEACHES TEAMWORK

HEATHER: From my experience in both product design and entrepreneurship, I found people often rushed into problem-solving: designing prototypes and business plans before they really understood the problem. That is one of the fundamental reasons I wanted to push for more problem finding and framing in the DEC core, which anthropology does very well. In addition to this emphasis, we are also introducing students to working effectively in teams. People tend to think of the lone anthropologist in a mud hut in a third-world country. That hardly conjures up notions of building teamwork. How does ethnography come into play in developing team players? Does adding anthropology into the core actually work against our goals of getting students to learn to collaborate?

SARAH: Not at all. Anthropologists in academic and corporate settings frequently work as part of a research team, and fieldwork can be a big part of creating a successful team. At the beginning of each client project, we try to erase the line between the client team and the consulting team to create a single, unified working group with shared expectations and goals. It’s difficult. Everyone comes from different perspectives. Organizational cultures create different ideas of what a team is and how a great team should function. Even when we use the same words to talk about consumers, ideas, and innovation, we doubtless have different specifics in mind (see Neese as well as Hasbrouck and Scull, this volume). A project kick-off meeting, designed to get everyone on the same page, is in reality most likely an exercise in finding out how many different pages everyone is on. When the project actually gets under way, the first activity is typically going out into the field to collect data and learn about people and their lives. Fieldwork becomes the true team-building experience. It’s like a road trip: it puts both client and consultants out into the unknown, in an unfamiliar city, with unfamiliar people, touring unfamiliar homes, stores, and offices. Unexpected things happen, and people are forced to deal with the unexpected together. Along the way team members get to know each other much better than they ever would around a conference room table, or even a dinner table. Collaboration happens because it must: when you’re in a participant’s home, someone asks the questions, someone else holds the camera, someone else takes notes. Everyone is engaged because everyone has a job to do, and you can’t exactly check your smartphone in the middle of an interview. Gathering great data about people and their lives also helps. The data provide everyone with a new, shared set of information to work with, and everyone begins to work with the same information instead of just focusing on what each individual knew before the project started. Without fail, by the next big meeting, folks who have been in the field doing research
together have begun to form a collective sense of team identity. This collaborative approach to fieldwork, which intentionally helps build relationships between team members, is what our students are learning.

**LISA:** The most effective way I’ve found to get students to see the importance of working in teams is to lead them through exercises that demonstrate the conspicuous gaps in knowledge that result from one person’s attempt to assess a situation or come up with a solution. Simple observation exercises requiring students to go in teams to a common location and write down everything that happens (not everything they see, but everything that happens) in a 10-minute period are very effective. They complete the exercise without speaking to one another before, during, or afterwards. When they return to class and report their findings, they realize that they are capable of being in the same place and noticing what happens in very different ways. So when they collect information to understand or solve problems, they want to work with other people, and they often choose team members who see things very differently. The person concentrating on dialogs wants to work with the person who notices traffic flows, or the one who focuses on people interacting with their gadgets. It also gets them to think in terms of “an” answer as opposed to “the” answer. “An” answer can accommodate another answer. “The” answer has a harder time with that.

How many ethnographic studies would have been written differently if the fieldwork had been a collaborative effort?

**INSERTING ANTHROPOLOGY INTO THE CURRICULUM THROUGH INTEGRATIVE EXPERIENCES**

**HEATHER:** Collaboration and shared gained insights are great goals and outcomes, but how do you institutionalize this beyond a single course experience and really affect the program?

**LISA:** I would also say that it depends on how anthropology is added to the curriculum. If it is tacked on as a separate course, or as an elective, it reinforces the belief that anthropology is optional, or something that belongs in a mud hut by itself. The DEC research methods course, Learning from Fieldwork, was designed to be user-friendly on a couple of levels. It is clear that the methods taught in the course come from anthropology. Many of the texts are ethnographic methods texts written by anthropologists (e.g., Bernard 2011; Kutsche 1997; Wolcott 2008), the jargon of anthropology is present throughout the syllabus, the course was co-created with anthropologists as consultants, and anthropologists are among those who teach the course. The course is also taught by faculty from different disciplinary backgrounds, and will no doubt be taught
differently from their perspective. To give the course some uniformity of methods taught, faculty interested in teaching the course attend workshops to learn specifically how these research methods fit into anthropological research. The larger message here is that faculty from many disciplines can teach such a course because they also conduct fieldwork and use ethnographic research methods. Students come to understand that while ethnographic methods are most commonly associated with the discipline of anthropology, they are applicable to other areas of study. In my opinion, this is a true integration of both the anthropological perspective as well as ethnographic methods into the DEC curriculum. If it is truly integrated as it is in the DEC curriculum, students will experience it as part of a core set of skills or perspectives that they need to master to be effective at whatever they do next. I’ve seen courses in other programs in which students form teams with one engineering major, one business major, and one anthropologist. This is a good start, and it presents a format where three disciplines are equally important to problem-solving, fact-finding, design, etc. Knowing how to work with anthropologists, engineers, or entrepreneurs represents one level of skills integration. Knowing how to think and see like an anthropologist, and an engineer, and an entrepreneur, is a deeper level of integration.

HEATHER: Part of our intent in the DEC core was to go beyond the decades-old collaborative course form of simply coordinating functions: design it (design), build it (engineering), and sell it (business). The type of collaboration Sarah mentions in the field is exactly what inspired us to create this core, common set of experiences and tools, and anthropology comes in as an excellent Swiss army knife of sorts. Given this collaborative field experience, what are some of the key exercises or experiences you present to orient students to this way of thinking?

SARAH: One of the first things you have to do is get students out of their classrooms, off the computer, and out into the world together. You can't build empathy with another person without stepping into their world. One of my favorite in-class exercises is borrowed from the Stanford University Needfinding course taught by Dev Patnaik called Moccasins. It requires teams of students to spend several hours across multiple days with someone whose life is completely different from theirs and to come back and tell the class this person’s story from their point of view, as if they’re standing in their shoes. Before they begin, each person writes down their expectations of what they’ll see. At the end, they have to tell a new story. I’ve had students spend time with campus police, Chipotle managers, drycleaners, surgeons, and people living in assisted living facilities, with great results. Without fail, the teams find that the more time they spend with another person, in the other person’s environment, the more they are truly
able to understand who that person is, why they act as they do, and what matters to him/her.

**LISA:** I use a similar exercise in the field course I teach in Turkey, which is also open to students who have just finished their first year, as well as upper-level students. I divide a class of 15 into five groups, pair each group with someone who lives in Istanbul, and send the groups out with the assignment to see the city. The Istanbul residents have been prompted to take their groups to very different places within the city. At the end of the day we regroup, and the students begin to describe the “Istanbul” they saw. Of course, there are lots of contested opinions that get passed around in that discussion: lots of “That’s not how I saw it” or “Where did you see that?” The point here, much like your Moccasins exercise, is to learn to ask about the experiences of others, to question one’s own experience and the significance of it, and to have more awareness about how knowledge is created. This pushes students to be able to identify and to think critically about culturally constructed meanings and categories. How can we read what we see before us? What does “dirty” mean? What is success? What constitutes a good marriage? What does it mean to be healthy? How are these concepts defined, and why or how do they change across or within cultural contexts? If students can situate meanings and practices within a broader, longer spectrum of human behavior, they are beginning to think like anthropologists.

**HEATHER:** What other aspects of a classic anthropological point of view inform what you teach in the Ethnographic Research Methods course?

**LISA:** The anthropological perspective teaches us that meanings are culturally constructed and context dependent. Letting the field site “speak to us” and shape our research is a cornerstone of an anthropological approach. Similarly, project conditions should determine the research approach when conducting research to inform an entrepreneurial venture or new design.

**SARAH:** Depending on what other training you’ve had, it can be hard to accept that there isn’t one single way to conduct good research, that what’s good in one project is not the same as what’s good in another project, given different contexts and goals.

I struggled with this issue in my first job as a design researcher, at Doblin Group in Chicago. I had just graduated with a master’s degree in social science from the University of Chicago and had learned about scientific method, rigorous data collection, and validity of research. My colleagues told me what our research questions were and asked my opinion on how we should go about answering the questions. The plan I initially devised took three times as long
and cost twice as much as we could afford. The research plan was whittled down considerably. The path we took worried me. I didn’t believe that it was “real research.” But in the end, we generated insights for our clients, and developed a point of view about what they should do. Since then, I have a more nuanced understanding about the difference between research that’s conducted to be predictive and comprehensive and research that’s conducted to be stimulating, provocative, and inspirational. In reality, the appropriate question to ask isn’t “Is this a valid research process or not?” but “What is the purpose of the project?” and “What kinds of research can achieve that goal?” Different projects require different kinds of research depending on how people plan to use that research. Only once you can articulate the goal of your research can you design a project that accomplishes your goals. Then, you choose different methods of data collection and analysis, using appropriate numbers of participants based on whether you’re trying to inspire new ideas, to develop a statistically valid understanding of consumer behaviors, or to evaluate the potential success of existing ideas.

This seems like common sense, but in practice, it is tricky to implement. People often plan new projects based on what has worked well in the past. We get into the habit of doing something a certain way, and it takes time and effort to question that approach with each new project.

**THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ETHNOGRAPHY ACROSS DISCIPLINES**

**HEATHER:** Taking this line of thinking a bit further, what are the other challenges that you’ve encountered doing this work professionally, and how does it inform your approach to teaching ethnographic methods for design, entrepreneurship, engineering, or product/service development?

**SARAH:** Perhaps the most challenging part of using ethnographic methods in this way is ensuring that your insights are actionable, not just valid and illuminating. The research process has to provide data that are useful. And it’s difficult to tell how actionable a research finding is without actually using it.

So when I teach these methods at the University of Pennsylvania, I try to get my students to close the loop as quickly and as often as possible. As soon as they start conducting analysis, I ask them to start generating ideas and implications based on their research. And if there’s no clear “so what” from what they’re finding, if they can’t generate new ideas for the design of a product, an experience, or a business, I send them back to work. Unfortunately, this is not always the way that design research is implemented in business today. Too often, data are collected, analysis is completed, and then the ideation begins.
Sometimes a company will enlist one team or company to do the data collection and analysis and another to do the ideation, strategy, or product development work. That approach leads to weaker research and weaker ideas. I teach students to consciously mix ideation into the research process. Closing the loop in the process, going from seeing something out there in the world, to drawing conclusions about what you see, to deriving implications for your project helps student learn what is well-executed research versus poorly executed research.

The DEC curriculum is set up to help students learn how to get to the “so what.” The first class they take, the Integrated Design Process, introduces students to the entire process, exposes them to how ethnographic methods fit into the process, and requires them to apply their learning to a real project. This immediately helps them understand why and how it’s valuable. Then, they have a chance to get better at implementing those methodologies through more practice in the Ethnographic Research Methods course.

HEATHER: Great point about mixing ideation into the research process and seeking focused results that are actionable. One of the objections I received early on from faculty is that students are not emotionally ready, let alone cognitively prepared, to tap into this level of empathy. Do you find this to be true and, if so, how do you address this?

LISA: I think undergrads are ready for this as soon as they arrive, when they are first-year students. When I was at Babson, there was a foundation course for first-year students in History and Society called Crises in Citizenship and Community, and I taught that course for several years. We used Appiah’s Cosmopolitanism (2006) to try to get students to think beyond their own perspectives. Again, it’s easy to read about the concept of caring for people you don’t know and have never seen, or to even understand how they are similar or different. It is more of a challenge to get students to question their unexamined assumptions about how much of their experience is a shared experience among the people they see every day. To that end, I would start that course with an exercise in defining community. The students had to write what they knew to be a truthful statement about Babson culture on the whiteboard. We would then go through the statements one by one to see how many of the statements rang true for all of the students. For example, one student would write that Babson is a friendly place. Another student would write Babson students don’t seem to have any fun . . . or that Babson has a partying culture. In a class of 30, there were usually two or three general statements that the class would identify as a common experience. That simple exercise usually resulted in students asking, “Who is we?” throughout the rest of the course when someone would make a general
statement about how “we” feel or what “we” believe. So even in the very first weeks of the first semester of the first year, it is possible to get them to examine their assumptions about shared experiences, shared identity, shared beliefs.

They get it at that age. I think their ability to grasp the concept depends more upon our ability to design effective learning experiences for them. (Both of these exercises are part of the DEC curriculum now.)

SARAH: I agree, Lisa. I think the sooner we help students get outside of their comfort zones, and the sooner we start helping them see how their experience is unique and not universal, the better. And starting early means that students have less to unlearn. It does stretch them developmentally and cognitively, but it stretches them in the right direction; the more students exercise these muscles, the better they’ll be at it. The ability to develop empathy with others is one of those lifelong skills that will serve students in a number of ways once they start developing it, and I think it will help make them more competitive in the job market and serve them in their careers as well as in the classroom.

HEATHER: That is encouraging. If teaching empathy isn’t a problem, what concepts are problematic? Have you identified concepts that are particularly difficult for students to grasp at this stage? How do you teach them?

LISA: Anthropology is all about how knowledge and behavior of all types, or what we “know” to be true and right, is culturally constructed and context dependent. And fieldwork is a process that starts as broadly as “What’s going on?” and gets more defined along the way. We can never predict how long it will take or exactly where it will lead. So with students who are used to learning just to test well, I make experiencing the ambiguity, the failure, and the revisions part of the grade. It sounds very mechanical, but it works. For every research plan that my students write, they are expected to revise it at least twice in the semester. They get more credit for keeping track of more revisions. They get bonus points for sharing their crappy first drafts of their research plan and explaining the parts that turned out to be unfeasible or unrealistic. They are marked down if they don’t report any revisions. I assume that they will fail or misfire during fieldwork, as we all occasionally do. They are required to report those experiences and they are marked down if they don’t ‘fess up. Finally, they are required to describe ways in which they dealt with ambiguity (I called it “not knowing”). In other words, they’re not evaluated on getting THE ANSWER regarding a particular topic of inquiry. They’re evaluated in terms of how they go through the process of fieldwork, and how they contribute to other students’ learning by sharing their experiences with the class. In a sense, they’re no different from us, from faculty members. If we were rewarded in some way for
reporting the false starts, the misfires, for showing the crappy first drafts, we would do the same.

**SARAH:** It is hard for students to grasp the idea that there is no one right answer. It’s also hard for them to develop the flexibility to revise, adapt, and iterate their work as they’re doing it. Teaching ethnography can act as a Trojan horse for teaching flexibility and adaptability, too. To do ethnographic research well, students need to learn to give up control of their interviews to their research participants. In the course of an interview, they need to be prepared to throw out their research protocols and follow the direction that the conversation takes, picking up cues from the participants’ language and environment to direct their questions. In the course of a project, they often realize that their incoming hypothesis is absolutely incorrect. Sometimes, that means they just need to shift the line of questioning. Sometimes, they need to recalibrate their entire research plan, including both who they are talking to and what they observe. This kind of flexibility and acknowledging that you don’t have the answer is not easy, for students or for professionals. We’ve literally had clients break down in tears during fieldwork because they’ve just realized that they don’t know their business or their customers as well as they thought they did. But hopefully, by giving students the chance early in their careers to experience not knowing as an empowering experience, they’ll be open to putting themselves in situations where they need to feel their way towards the answer in the future.

**FACULTY DEVELOPMENT:**
**INTEGRATING LIBERAL & PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION**

**HEATHER:** Absolutely! Teaching students to move outside of their comfort zones is critical, but what about faculty? We developed a liberal and professional co-teaching model. We have one faculty member somewhat grounded in the discipline and the other from outside the discipline. This absolutely pushed them outside of their comfort zone. However, we found that the faculty experience teaching the pilot courses was the single biggest conversion moment in getting them enthusiastic about further experimentation. We simulated experiences throughout building DEC in workshops and charrettes and workgroups, etc. Have you had different or similar experiences engaging faculty at your institutions or enterprises?

**SARAH:** I noticed the same thing you did, Heather, with the DEC faculty. When I worked with the first faculty team that was going to teach the IDP core course the summer before the course was taught, I observed a little fear and apprehension. This kind of work is scary! Amazingly, when I met up with the
same faculty members five months later, the level of confidence had shot up. Not because everything had gone exactly according to plan, because it hadn’t, but because each person had become more accustomed to teaching new materials, bringing the diverse disciplines of design, engineering, and commerce into conversation with each other, and taking students on a journey that was almost as new to them as it was to the students.

I don’t think we should underestimate how hard this transition is for faculty, and how deeply it challenges ingrained notions of what a professor is, what constitutes expertise, and what it means to be part of the discourse of a discipline. (The fact that we call a field of study a discipline says it all!) In the United States, people who have been successful in academia have been successful because they have specialized. They know things about their fields that no one else knows, and they have claimed a territory for expertise. But asking people from different disciplines to integrate their work with each other and teach multidisciplinary content pushes us outside that territory. It forces us to discuss, reflect upon, and teach things that we’re not experts in. This pushes everybody outside of their comfort zone. We feel like it is only our right to speak about that which we know cold, topics where we can quote the literature. But if we’re asking it of our students, we need to model it ourselves.

The only way we can get there is through starting the dialog and setting up opportunities for faculty to experience the power of collaboration and integration. The IDP course is one of those opportunities.

**LISA:** Good point, Sarah. We do know things about our field that no one else knows but we fall short somehow on knowing how to explain all of the ways in which our field, whatever that is, contributes to the larger cross-disciplinary exploration of particular topics. In academia we are trained to be “back of the store” scholars. We produce knowledge for and within our respective disciplines. We have inward discussions about the merits of our perspectives, often to the discredit (can I say that?) of other disciplinary perspectives. We don’t generally teach our students about being the “front of the store” scholar, one who connects with other disciplines, shares the merits of one’s disciplinary perspective with colleagues from different traditions, and communicates easily across those boundaries.

It will be easier to get faculty on board for specific collaborative initiatives if there is more openness on campus to collaborating in general. There are always examples of faculty members who collaborate on an informal basis. Aside from my position in the sociology department and in the interdisciplinary Business, Entrepreneurship and Organizations program, I find other opportunities to work across departments that aren’t part of my formal duties. This semester, I’m
a guest lecturer in a Rhode Island School of Design course on product development taught by an industrial design professor. Another colleague from engineering is also participating. We haven’t made any formal announcement about this experiment, but we are experimenting nonetheless. I think this happens a lot. Finding these examples and sharing them with the rest of the faculty might lead to the discovery of even more instances of informal collaboration. In the absence of an administrative mandate, I think it starts like that.

EXPECTATIONS & PARTING THOUGHTS

HEATHER: What do we hope will be the fruit of all of this labor? Aspirationally, when we look at graduates now and 10 years from now, how do you expect these professionals to operate in their professions?

SARAH: I hope that graduates excel at both generating new ideas and getting people in their world excited about those ideas, so that they are able to make a difference in their professional worlds. When students learn ethnographic research methods in the DEC courses, they also learn how to communicate their interpretations, ideas, and conclusions in compelling ways through stories about the people and places that they study. Knowing which stories best embody your point of view and which are most likely to persuade other people of your point of view is a skill that will help students negotiate any workplace landscape in the future. In my time at Jump Associates, we worked closely with a team within General Mills called the iSquad. The team of internal consultants was responsible for facilitating brand teams through the innovation process and helping them come up with new products, new marketing campaigns, and new packaging ideas. Because they were a part of the organization, they had a great sense of what kinds of stories would resonate with their internal audience. In their work, they spent an equal amount of time communicating the results from their research as they did gathering and analyzing research. During the time that we worked together, they had a hand in the majority of big, profitable innovations within the company and were responsible for the big shifts in how the company related to their consumers because they were able to tell persuasive stories that galvanized internal teams into action. I would love to see DEC graduates be able to have that kind of impact.

LISA: Isn’t there an iterative relationship between professionals and the workplace? We change the workplace and it changes us? It is hard to say what the workplace will be like. As for DEC graduates as future professionals, I hope they will take their lateral-thinking, hybrid perspectives with them and become collaboration catalyzers. If they have learned in college to see across disciplin-
ary divides and to build an eclectic portfolio of problem-solving approaches, they will want to be able to continue working that way once they move into their professions.

**HEATHER:** We’ve talked a lot about what we’ve been trying to accomplish, why we’re undertaking these initiatives, and how we’re approaching it. I’d like to take also take a moment to look ahead into the future. When we succeed, what will success look like? What is the long-term impact you would like to see more broadly?

**SARAH:** I would like to see more and more of this kind of initiative taking place at a variety of scales, across a broad range of academic institutions. American universities currently face an innovator’s dilemma not so different from the one faced by the disk drive industry that Clayton Christensen (1997) wrote about. For universities, the potential disruptors are multiple: technological, economic, and social forces are all driving towards change. The very skills and abilities that we’re trying to teach DEC students—how to interpret and adapt to change and prepare for an uncertain future—are the skills that faculty and staff throughout academia will also need to learn. Not every school will address their innovators dilemma in the same way—some will reorganize their programs, some will embrace online learning, some will engage in international expansion—but every school will have to do something. At the University of Pennsylvania, where I teach, teams are currently experimenting with all of these different kinds of initiatives, as well as several more. My hope is that in teaching these skills to our students we learn them ourselves, and end up leading change rather than becoming its victims. What Philadelphia University is doing with DEC is a bold experiment; we need to see more of them!

**LISA:** I like that. From my view, faculty will follow the lead of administration and what they incentivize. When we are at our most inspired stage, after the dissertation, we all learn that success will come from aiming for tenure and nothing else. In a sense, we are also striving to pass the test, and the test is the tenure review process. Believe me, if innovation experiments were a requirement for tenure, faculty would be innovative: or the ones who are already innovative would be more public about it. We are trained to master our disciplines, not to innovate on them. As a cultural anthropologist who jumped over to the entrepreneurship division (aka THE DARK SIDE) earlier in my career, I was considered a lost or unfocused colleague and not an example of how valuable the liberal arts perspective really is in the study of entrepreneurship. A colleague of mine from graduate school is now working at Intel. She regularly
offers to go back to our department to talk with students about what it’s like to work as an anthropologist outside of academia. I don’t know that they have ever taken her up on that offer. I would like to see an attack on two fronts: demand from the outside for more innovative approaches, which is already happening to a certain extent; and university administrators who reward academics early on for thinking outside the compartment. Of course, graduate programs would also have to encourage students to look at their disciplines as constructs that can survive visiting the intersections with other disciplines. Now that would be interesting. Heather, you have been asking all the questions here, but what do you think? What long-term impact would you like to see?

HEATHER: I suspect, and have thus far experienced, that students are ready for this and even hungry for it. They want the applied, the relevant, and the real world even if it is messy. My hopes are similar to yours in that this experiment will force changes in one small institution in Philadelphia that may catalyze changes at other institutions. Philadelphia University is not the only to try this: Rotman School of Management at the University of Ontario, Stanford, Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering, University of Pennsylvania, Babson College, Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University, and many other institutions have been working at this at the course and program levels for decades. Universities will need to rethink many processes and structures such as organizing faculty and students around functional disciplines and related identities, rewarding lifetime employment based upon singular, isolated expertise, and process rigidities that discourage experimentation at many places. For the students, my hope is that they push this farther than what we started and that the first and second graduating classes from DEC, along with graduates from the University of Pennsylvania and Brown, stay engaged in their institutions as active alumni who influence the next iterations. One of the biggest next hurdles is how to really leverage teaching something like anthropological tools and skills across an entire field such as marketing or engineering. In creating DEC we purposefully created an integrated core so the design thinking, anthropology, business models, etc. are taught in an applied, integrated way, but that is only 10 percent of the student’s course load. Traditionally, education is delivered in a somewhat transactional way through the consumption of independent, often disconnected courses, frequently with a large division between liberal and professional education. Philadelphia University has its sights set on tearing down those walls. It was a privilege to be part of the first phase of the experiment, and I look forward to watching their evolution and, I hope, the impact across other institutions. Thank you both for helping with this; your contributions were absolutely invaluable!
SARAH: Heather, thanks for including us in this conversation. I think I can speak for Lisa when I say it has been a privilege for both of us to be part of the experiment as well.

REFERENCES


NOTES

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1 VUCA is a military term that migrated into business leadership management in the early 2000s. It was adopted as a central mindset in planning the new College of Design, Engineering, and Commerce.


3 A human-centered, empathy-oriented approach to design engineering was first introduced to Stanford University in 1958 with the introduction of the design program into the mechanical engineering department. This was a novel way of thinking through how to best approach design and engineering problems. Ultimately, the perspective and methodology was formalized though the introduction of a course called Needfinding, which is currently taught by Dev Patnaik, who is also the CEO of Jump Associates. The thinking also underlies the approach of the Hasso Platter Institute of Design at Stanford University, which was established by IDEO founder David Kelly.

4 The practice of design research in business today is a topic that is thoroughly discussed and hotly debated regularly in anthrodesign, an online community that discusses the intersection of anthropology and design. To see some of these discussions, see Anthrodesign.com.