Letters to the Editor

What is the role of an interdisciplinary researcher?
From JAMES A SMITH1,2* and GEMMA E CAREY1,3

John Lynch’s editorial entitled ‘it’s not easy being interdisciplinary’ struck a chord for those involved in interdisciplinary research.1 This was an enlightening editorial which raises, in our opinion, salient points relating to the complexity of engaging in interdisciplinary research. He specifically mentions that ‘the challenges of interdisciplinarity remain largely the same as they did 60 years ago’. We agree, and remain confused as to why the public health community, inclusive but not limited to those involved in epidemiology, has distanced itself from the interdisciplinary research debate. Our concern relates to the growing number of interdisciplinary postgraduate research opportunities on offer, particularly cross-enrolments in public health, which have consequently produced interdisciplinary researchers that lack an intellectual home.2 As cross-enrolled postgraduate research students we both fall into this category. We feel confident that we have a research role, but are less confident that this role can be accommodated within existing research structures. Indeed, reflecting on our own experiences, it appears that the majority of interdisciplinary postgraduate research students are haphazardly accommodated in an academic system that is structured along strict disciplinary lines.2 As such, we extend Lynch’s discussion by asking—what is the role of an interdisciplinary researcher?

The interdisciplinary researcher is characterized as having a breadth of knowledge in theory, approach and discourse, rather than an intricate and in-depth knowledge of one discipline.2 We acknowledge that there are advantages and disadvantages of advocating breadth over depth, but argue the role of interdisciplinary researchers commences with the intention of bridging disciplines—a concept we refer to as a ‘virtual intellectual home’. This role prevents the ‘withering of collaborations’ such as those experienced by Lynch.1,2

However, the role of interdisciplinary researchers extends beyond bridging disciplines. It involves negotiating the tensions and divides of working between disciplines.2 It also involves the synthesis of disciplinary ideas, which are both relevant and accessible to the disciplines being bridged. Moreover, its relevance to public health lies in the ability to translate the dialects of two or more disciplines to promote a common understanding on a specific issue. So what is the problem?

Well, as Lynch mentions interdisciplinary research involves understanding ‘different languages, concepts, substance, and methods so as to embrace its relevance and application’.1 Given that the majority of universities and research institutions remain organized along strict disciplinary boundaries, current structuring tends to privilege a nuanced and in-depth understanding of one discipline, rather than appreciating a breadth of knowledge across two or more.2,3 Institutions organized around disciplines rather than common goals, can be hostile to researchers who attempt to breakdown disciplinary divisions.2,3 These can threaten and undermine foundations of specific disciplines.2 In order to negotiate a virtual home for interdisciplinary researchers institutional systems, structures and research policies need to appreciate, and be accommodating of, these concerns. In particular, support must be given to interdisciplinary postgraduate students and early career researchers in order for them to have successful career trajectories.

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