

Tell Your Story

Tips for Creating an Interdisciplinary or Transdisciplinary Dossier

When evaluating a candidate for faculty promotion and tenure, reviewers within an academic discipline can reference well-known, identifiable disciplinary standards and norms. Analogous standards for inter- and transdisciplinary scholarship, however, are often not as well-defined; thus, assessing work that goes beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries may require more effort by the reviewer. Reviewers also may be unfamiliar with interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches like those under review.

It is incumbent upon the inter/transdisciplinary researcher, teacher and academician, therefore, to make clear in your dossier narratives why your work is valid, novel and important, particularly when disciplinary standards would not apply.

Make the case

Be explicit about the value of your inter/transdisciplinary research, scholarship and creative expression, and how it achieves excellence in scholarship based on widely recognized criteria—e.g., by contributing original works to academic literature, or being supported by well-recognized funding agencies. Articulate in your dossier preamble why your contribution in the context of an inter/transdisciplinary approach is important, and then reinforce its value throughout your narratives. Amplify the university's rhetoric around interdisciplinary research and its importance; refer to any mentions of interdisciplinary expectations in your letter of offer.

Examples of widely recognized advantages of the inter/transdisciplinary approach and how they might be reflected:

Interdisciplinary research can reach a broader audience.

In addition to those within my discipline, my research has been read by and cited by researchers in the following disciplines...

Transdisciplinary research can reach a broader audience beyond academia.

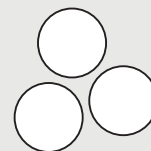
In addition to academic audiences, my research has been responsive to the needs of stakeholders and helped to inform their decisions in the following ways...

Challenges for peer review

In peer review, evaluating the scope, quality and impact of an individual's scholarly contributions can be increasingly challenging with inter- and transdisciplinary research, as the individual's contributions are less separable from team output and influences outside of their discipline.

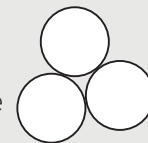
Disciplinary

Individual scholarly contributions can be judged according to well-established disciplinary norms, and the evaluation is presumed to be objective



Multidisciplinary

Individual scholarly contributions are entirely separable in final products and can still be judged according to disciplinary norms, so the evaluation is still presumed to be objective



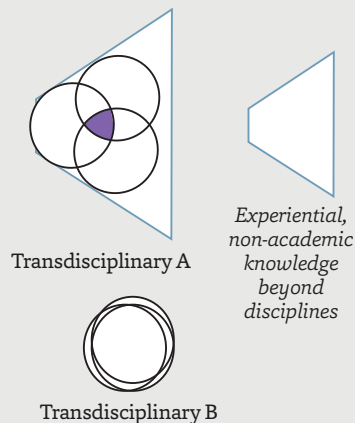
Interdisciplinary

Individual contributions are not easily separable from team projects, which cannot be evaluated according to disciplinary norms, so evaluation becomes more subjective and challenging



Transdisciplinary

Individual contributions are not easily separable from team projects, which cannot be evaluated according to disciplinary norms, and academic scholarship mixes intentionally with non-academic knowledge, so peer review does not fully capture the scholar's contributions and impact



Interdisciplinary research allows one to apply their disciplinary expertise to address more complex questions that extend beyond their discipline through improved description, explanation or prediction.

This publication contributes a new understanding of X that has not been possible from within our discipline, but was dependent on my disciplinary contribution for these reasons.... My disciplinary contribution was X, and it has primarily influenced how the team will...

Interdisciplinary research may be more applicable to real world challenges.

The issue this grant addressed requires an approach that combines X, Y and Z for an effective response.

Interdisciplinary research can open new avenues of investigation and stimulate innovation within and among disciplines.

The inclusion of insights from the allied fields of X and Y has led to a novel approach to the study of X within our field; therefore, my disciplinary collaboration has led to the following new insights (or questions) in our discipline...

Transdisciplinary research can solve critically important problems that are resistant to cognitive structures that prevail within academic disciplines and/or dependent upon spatial, temporal or cultural factors that occur in specific situations.

To resolve challenges faced by community X, a participatory co-learning process that incorporated local community understanding and experience, a contribution from my scholarship consisting of X, and additional contributions from fields X, Y and Z led to the following key insights and impacts that would have not been feasible for any of the partners individually...

Interdisciplinary teaching can improve the ability of students to think critically, recognize bias, and tolerate complexity and ambiguity.

By combining readings and experience from fields X and Y with our typical curriculum content in the course I teach, students have been able to achieve new learning outcomes including...

Transdisciplinary teaching can improve students' appreciation of ethical concerns from multiple perspectives beyond the academic.

Students in the course I teach worked directly with people in communities A and B, shaping their understanding of the topic through first-hand accounts of experience with it and also achieving learning outcomes that are not possible through any academic discipline including...

Address the differences between disciplinary and inter/transdisciplinary scholarship and creative expression

Inter/transdisciplinary work takes time to create new insights, hypotheses, approaches, methods, etc., that are in and of themselves a form of creative expression. Call out the time and effort required to, for example, connect with colleagues from other disciplines, work in teams with different disciplinary vocabularies and conceptual frameworks, align multiple disciplinary methodologies and priorities, attend additional conferences and meetings, train students in multiple areas of expertise, and publish via outlets that may be outside one's core discipline and/or newly established.

Individual roles in inter/transdisciplinary research may differ from disciplinary-based contributions and be less obvious to reviewers. Describe your role clearly for each project, including how your work has shaped the creative activities of the team and how your efforts have enabled the research to occur. The Contributor Roles Taxonomy offers 14 terms (casrai.org/credit).

Outputs come in different forms.

» Publishing

If you have published somewhere outside your unit's typical academic outlets (for example, some units have a list of journals in which publications are expected), be explicit about the advantages of publishing in this outlet, e.g., that you are reaching a broader or different audience than you would otherwise, or a newly launched interdisciplinary journal's openness to new scholarship and ideas.

Explain different disciplines' authorship conventions while also highlighting your specific contributions.

I publish in disciplines X, Y and Z. In discipline X, authorship is determined alphabetically by last name, and my contributions to these publications are in the methodology development. In discipline Y, authorship is determined by the order of contribution within this discipline, and my contribution is in applying the methodology to the specific problem in the field. In discipline Z, authorship is random, and my contribution is in connecting methodologies across domains.

Where to Articulate Your Valuable Contributions

Biographical summary

Descriptions of your approach to teaching, research and service

Statements about your contributions to team-based scholarly output such as presentations, publications, performances and grants

Be clear when other fields have different publication and scholarship cultures, norms or processes from your own discipline. State what those differences are and if possible, cite reports or papers that document this.

In computer science, top publication venues are often peer-reviewed extended conference abstracts. While this is unusual in the academic publication process, it is typical and customary to the field, and the top conferences are as selective and prestigious as the top journals in other fields. In the humanities, a sole-authored book is often expected, and there is great importance placed on the reputation of the publisher. Another critical difference in disciplinary norms is the length and time of the review process. In economics, for example, it is not unusual for publication in a top journal to require 2-3 years for an extensive review process and multiple rounds of revisions (Ellison. The slowdown of the economics publishing process. 2002. Journal of Political Economy 110.5: 947-993).

» **Community engagement**

Be explicit about community engagement as a form of research and scholarship. Explain its widely recognized advantages and how those advantages are present in your work, as well as the effort required to achieve them.

Consider requesting that your TIU head or P&T chair seek a letter or letters from community partners to reflect the impact of your research.

» **Scholarly networks**

Success in inter/transdisciplinary research depends on strong and productive relationships with others. These relationships take time to develop, but once developed can spark and support creative efforts over many years. Consider treating the networks and relationships that result from the additional transactions as scholarly output.

Be clear

Write and rewrite your narrative to be focused and efficient, so that your approach, your disciplinary contribution, and your impact beyond your discipline can be understood. Align your CV and dossier terminologies.

Ask mentors and other trusted advisors—including from outside your TIU—to read your draft dossier, reflect back what they see as compelling, and help identify where it can be clarified and strengthened. If your TIU doesn't assign faculty mentors as a part of its processes and culture, talk to your TIU head about possible colleagues you could approach about serving in such a role.

Include all of your appointments with dates in your biographical narrative, even if one or more have ended. Committees and chairs should reflect these appointments in their letters. If the appointments came with specific expectations for your work and contributions, be sure to spell those out.

Be strategic

In advance of your P&T review, discuss with eligible faculty in your TIU the work you're doing, so that when they review your materials nothing is a surprise. During annual performance evaluations with your TIU head, discuss in practical terms what you're doing, how you're spending your time, and/or the intentional risks you're taking so those can be captured in your annual reviews.

When identifying external letter writers, University Libraries and the Office of Institutional Research and Planning can assist with identifying research peers (with Web of Science database and Academic Analytics respectively), but be intentional about whom you decide to suggest. Your own network of collaborators, particularly in other institutions, is likely to provide the best leads to potential reviewers who would understand your work and the importance of your contributions to inter/transdisciplinary teams. Ask leaders in your partnering department(s) for suggestions about good external letter writers who will provide fair candidate evaluations.

Eliminate "othering" language from your dossier narrative, such as "alternate route" to tenure or academic success. There is one route to tenure at The Ohio State University, and interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work is a valuable part of it.