

Christopher Richmann: Paul Martens, thank you for joining the show today.

Paul Martens: Thanks Christopher. It's great to be here.

CR: I want to start by just asking you to, if you could, explain, decipher your title as Director of Interdisciplinary Studies here at Baylor?

PM: Well, that is an excellent question. In some ways it's an evolving title—or at least the job description is evolving as the Office of interdisciplinary programs is evolving. Initially, it wasn't much. There has only been an office for a couple of years. But let me just say where it is right now.

We have kind of three subgroups or some kind of groups of things happening under the interdisciplinary umbrella. One is Area Studies, which by definition are profoundly interdisciplinary. And we have currently four area studies: Latin-American studies, Asian studies, Slavic and East European studies, and Middle Eastern studies. And we're working on those right now to re-imagine what we can accomplish in those, in those kinds of fields. But that's kind of one area of interdisciplinary studies that's been part of the university for a long time.

There's a second group of, of things that are happening, and these are what we're now calling "Humanities Plus" programs. They're programs that are certainly interdisciplinary within the humanities, but they reach beyond the humanities in different ways. And so there's several programs that are at various stages in this kind of--in this group. So, we have Medical Humanities, which is a strong program. It's been around for a long time. We have Women and Gender Studies, which has not been around for as long. And we have things like Military Studies, which is virtually brand new and Humanities Fellows, which is launching in fall. So, all of these are profoundly interdisciplinary in their own way. And they're all asymmetrical to some extent. But they're all rooted in the humanities and yet reached beyond it. And they're essentially focused on programming within, within Arts and Sciences.

And then there's a third group of entities, shall we say. And in, in, in the kind of loosely under the umbrella of the office. And these are what we're calling "Humanities Plus Research Initiatives." And so, the Ethics Initiative, the Baylor Ethics Initiative is one of these. And there's a second one emerging right now, the Digital Humanities Initiative. And so these also are deeply rooted in the humanities in an interdisciplinary way, but reach beyond them, say in bioethics or data ethics. And certainly in digital humanities, there's, there's connections, deep connections between Computer Science and Engineering with the humanities as well.

So in some sense, the role I have is to support and encourage the existing programs, and growing new programs as necessary in this way. Because, as I think most of the people at Baylor are familiar with, we're a very traditional department-based university where hiring is done in departments, and that is all fantastic. The difficulty then becomes what happens when there's things that don't fit departments perfectly. And either departments fight over these things--and then you don't have collaboration like you need--or we need to find a place for these things to flourish. And that's what we're trying to build right now.

CR: That's great. I had heard of everything that you just listed off there and your organization of it is very helpful. Except I had not heard of the Humanities Fellows. Can you tell us what that is?

PM: Sure. Yes. So, this will be an undergraduate program and undergraduate major in the College of Arts and Sciences, in which students come in their first year. It's a cohort-based program where students take a heavy dose of core curriculum courses and then a substantial number of humanities

courses at their own discretion. And the point here is to allow students to get a full-bodied--embrace a full body kind of immersion in a variety of humanities. So it's a liberal arts education in a classic sense. And yet the students have probably, I think, don't quote me on this, but something like 42 hours of electives at the end of the program or built into the program as well. So they can second major, or they can create a program around a theme or topic that they want to pursue. So again, it's it's rooted in the humanities, but allows for an interdisciplinary kind of shaping of, of, of a program that, that student, students self-determining in consultation with the recent faculty.

CR: I suppose we should not get too far into the conversation without defining interdisciplinarity. It seems like it's maybe a catch all-term. But I've also seen, I think, you know, too, in the literature, some distinctions between interdisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary. Can you help us sort that out a little bit?

PM: Oh yeah, sure, I've got all the answers here. To start with first, it's an ambiguous term and some people will use these interchangeably. But let's step back for a moment. And I think it's helpful to make sense of these differences if we think about what it means to have a discipline. And I think academic disciplines are things we assume we understand, but in some ways, they're the result of, they're deeply rooted in many ways in the, in the Medieval University which had faculty. So you had faculty of theology, faculty of medicine, canon law, and the arts in 1200, University of Paris for example. And as, as, as we move on through the centuries, you have conflict emerging between these faculties. Who has the final say? So in the medieval world, it was assumed loosely, at least let's say loosely assumed, that theology was the "queen of the sciences." And so it got to determine how these were related. Well, in the Enlightenment, the conflict is settled in different ways. And so you have philosophy which emerges out of the arts in conflict with theology. And, and in a kind of move to secularize the university, you have discrete limits of knowledge ascribed to each discipline. And so what you have encoded then in the 19th century university, which our research universities are kind of loosely based on, is very clear rules about how each discipline understands knowledge, how it describes reality, and what counts as truth in every discipline is different. And so if you understand disciplines in that way, how you understand the relationship between them gets tricky.

Multidisciplinary often means--and I think the best way to understand multidisciplinary is when you have multiple disciplines talking about the same problem. And so you have, say, philosophy saying something about a problem. And then you have a political scientist saying something. And then you have linguistic experts saying something about a problem. And all you have is competing perspectives. So multidisciplinary is when you have multiple disciplines weighing in on a subject or a question.

Interdisciplinary then is beginning with multiple disciplines in trying to integrate them into a whole. So you have philosophy saying something and a political science and scientists saying something, and then trying to find bridges and ways to integrate what they're saying into a larger whole and a better way of seeing a challenge or problem. As soon as you have two disciplines, you can call it interdisciplinary, but usually, especially if it's a complex problem, you'll need multiple disciplines contributing this way. And so the integration that you have is increasingly complex as you go along.

And so in some ways, it functions the same way people use transdisciplinary. Of course, interdisciplinary emerges in the 1970s. And transdisciplinary is cooler and newer. And so it's around in the early 2000s. And it's, the code word for that would be holistic. And in essence, it, it, its aim is to accomplish the same thing as a properly integrated interdisciplinarity. But it depends on your kind of semantic parsing of the two terms *integrate* and *holistic*.

CR: Yeah, I've read I've read something also that said that transdisciplinary is maybe a little bit more, a little bit more, hopeful, a little bit more liminal, in the sense that, that it's recognizing that some things are just beyond the disciplines, and sort of take the tools that we have but need to look actually beyond any, any, any of our disciplines or even the disciplinary whole.

PM: Right. And it depends what do you mean by integrating disciplines and moving beyond. Because most of us would understand that there's partial integration when say, a literary theorist says something and then 20 years later, theology picks it up and integrates it into their discipline. There's, there's kind of a partial, this interdisciplinary like this. And usually in theology it is about 20 years after. But that's a joke about my own discipline. But, but holistic in the sense that transdisciplinary tries to indicate is "yes, but none of our, none of our tools are currently appropriate for this problem." And my only difficulty in assessing that is, "well, we only come from our areas of expertise and wherever we're going is contiguous with where we're starting." And so the hype of transdisciplinarity is we have to kind of qualitatively move to something else. But then where are we going and what does it mean to be there? And so, I love all of the terms, but I just think interdisciplinary captures best how we move in a university, in our knowledge growth.

CR: So as you were describing the histories of disciplines and thinking about the limits of disciplinary knowledge, it, it brought to mind to me something that I hadn't really thought about before, which is how this might be related to academic freedom. Because there's, there's, you know this, what is now I suppose a traditional notion of academic freedom that's very much tied to your discipline and what you're supposed to be an expert on. And I know that this is, this is very much an issue for discussion and debate now as we see in the Chronicle, folks tweeting on this or that and then wondering, if this is "covered" by academic freedom. Do you have any thoughts about that?

PM: Oh yeah, I mean Christopher you've put your finger on exactly why the conflict of the faculties emerges. I mean, you're talking, you know, the 1700s, late 1800s, early 1800s, when philosophers were trying to make claims that the censors didn't like. And so *The Conflict of the Faculties* that Immanuel Kant writes is essentially an argument for why philosophers should get to say what they want to say, because they're not talking about the same things, are not following the same rules as theologians are. So therefore, they shouldn't be responsible to the censors in the same way. And that's very—so the notion of academic freedom is deeply tied to the creation of disciplines in many ways. Which as soon as you want to step beyond those things, I mean, and, and this is where the problems of interdisciplinary come up is, "Okay, so how do we validate claims that don't fit the criteria each of our disciplines have for knowledge. And then even if they're good claims, how do we value those claims?"

CR: Right, yes. So let's think a little bit more in terms of the practice of education. Why is interdisciplinarity important for colleges?

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PM: Well, it's a great question, but I mean, I think that the simple, very tongue-and-cheek answer is because life is like that. There's a sense in which none of us experience our life through a single discipline. We experience our life in very complicated and complex ways and our reality that we encounter is very complex. You think of simple health. Is health biological? And which field of biology is health? Psychological? Is health spiritual? Is health any number of things? How do we define health? And so we live in a world in which we're constantly drawing on all of the disciplines at any given time. And when we, when our students experience life and when they have questions, they are naturally integrating these things into their own experience and into their own categories. And so what we try to bring as a university, it seems to me, is the best ways of thinking about all of these individual pieces. And what we haven't done very well is, how do we bring the best ways, the best

individual perspectives into a bigger whole? And that's where I think the future--that's what our students are asking for in many ways. As, as professionals, we tend to defer that to the kind of things that happen outside our classroom. But I think that we need to take that part of our role as educators seriously.

CR: A historical cynic could, could say, or maybe that maybe the future historians will say, as you brought up Kant and the importance of the Enlightenment here, is that what we're seeing with the rise of interdisciplinarity is really a recognition of the limits of that Enlightenment's hard, hard distinction between the disciplines without any unifying principle that for better or worse, the medieval Europe had in theology.

PM: Yeah, I think you could say that. What you could say, I mean, I don't know if, that the unifying principle piece is a little more complicated, but I think there's ways in which you could think of simply kind of in a pragmatic way, evolving, kind of the evolving relationship between the disciplines. And so there's a sense in which our disciplines have evolved. And so there's no reason why we can't attempt to negotiate these overlaps and connections in ways that aren't necessarily guided ahead of time by a principle or by a particular conclusion that we want to come to. And I think that's the beauty of, of research, is, we find things that ahead of time we wouldn't have known if we had said this is what we're planning to--I mean, these are the limits of what we're going to allow.

CR: Well, I love that you, that you, your tongue-in-cheek answer was, essentially, our lives are interdisciplinary, right? And I've heard it said in these types of conversations, you know, that the academy has disciplines and the world just has problems; the world has challenges, right?

PM: Yeah, that's, I mean, what people are missing there is that the Academy also has problems, but that's a different conversation. No, and I think there is real value--and I think we've seen this collectively over the last decade--there's real value in expertise. But I think there's also long-term value in recognizing the limits of expertise in the sense that no amount of data that's true or that represents reality necessarily matters to people unless there's multiple kind of ways of--unless people are--actually, how do we, how do we say this properly? In order to communicate that to people takes much more than a single discipline. And in order to shape people that are receptive to understanding that, it takes more than one discipline. And it takes the full embrace of our society in terms of its multiple--The kind of dispositions and values of our society also matter in deep ways. And those are interdisciplinary if nothing else, right?

CR: Yes. So in your role, you are overseeing or working with and facilitating both interdisciplinary teaching and curricula, but also interdisciplinary research. So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how these two things interact with each other or feed into each other.

PM: Yeah, that's a very good question. We'd like to think as, as, as professors that our, that there's a seamless connection between our teaching and our research and they are very fruitful, kind of mutually supporting. That's not always the case. And I think thinking about the difference this way for our students, at least--I think the liberal arts education by definition (and this is in some ways, an American phenomenon) is an attempt, loosely, to provide students with an interdisciplinary education. And so we assume they can put this together themselves--Um, we haven't done a whole lot of work in the liberal expedition about integrating all of the different perspectives--but we do think students ought to be exposed to all of these things and they ought to be able to understand all of these things. And I think that is in many ways the legacy of the American education system. That in some ways, I'm not sure we're valuing enough in our inner--and I think very clearly it's become clear in the last decades that we've kind of lost sight of the whole point of this is to create a students who can integrate these things as a whole. So I think part of our task as educators is to help

students see these really important perspectives from our disciplines and then fit them into a larger whole. I think at Baylor we especially, we should be equipped to do that because we are in many ways are committed to a single goal as the institution. Now the research piece isn't merely to kind of cultivate an appreciation for interdisciplinary kind of reality in our students. It is to understand problems and to engage problems in ways that we don't yet know the answers to from multiple perspectives in a way that leads to knowledge and leads to outcomes that might transcend any of our expertise. So in that sense, in the research part, we're pushing beyond our boundaries and recognizing the limits of what our expertise has to bring to the question. Problems like global health, or any problem within global health. And on, while there are a million problems, you could have problems with economy. You name it. These are, these are problems that require, I mean, the sort of wicked problems that have kind of a catchphrase recently, as you know, in recent years has, has risen. But there's a sense in which in interdisciplinary inquiry we need to collaborate and recognize that our contribution is only part of the answer. And that's difficult for, that's difficult for faculty whose careers are based on being experts in a field, right?

CR: Yeah, you really put your finger on something when you identified that the liberal arts tradition as sort of floating in the background of, of all of this. Our--at the ATL, we're going to be working on our, our publication, the *Review*, and the theme is interdisciplinarity. And it's no coincidence that we're having this conversation now to dovetail on that. But we actually, in our, in our sort of editorial meeting on this, we went, we went back and forth on, "well, should we include something on liberal arts?" And at the end of the day we said no because A, it kind of seemed too obvious. But B, because we didn't know, we didn't know if anybody would really be able to articulate--and I think you've already kind of said that--could really articulate what the interdisciplinary aims are and how those are achieved, rather than just sort of assuming that students will find a way to put all the pieces together in some way.

PM: Yeah, it's, it's a difficult thing. And I think when, when the liberal arts kind of project made sense in the medieval world, and it made sense in American Christian apologists century ago. It, it often doesn't make sense, at least not explicitly, in the way universities function today. In many ways. I mean, I love university, I love working in it, but it does function in many ways now, like a business. And its research is often hyper-focused and the funding is for hyper-focused kind of research in any one of these things. And certainly, we succeed in our particular disciplines by ignoring other disciplines. I mean, that's how generally you move up until you achieve a certain status, at which point then you can talk with other things. And I think what we've often lost sight of, is explicitly articulating how what we're doing matters in a bigger picture. I do think at Baylor with the core conversations that happened 4 or 5 years ago, in terms of redefining our undergraduate core, I think that is behind so much of what went on there. It was, it was an attempt to rethink and to, and to articulate clearly why we're doing, why we're requiring students to take particular classes and study particular things because we want students to think and look--well not look--think and, and understand things in a particular way by the time they're done. It's not something we can guarantee, but we've created conditions for truly integrated learning.

CR: So when you mentioned how, how traditionally faculty kind of rise in the academy through--very narrowly--through their, through their disciplinary scholarship, this, this brings me to a larger set of questions of what are the current obstacles for interdisciplinarity? So obviously there's the history of our, of how our disciplines function in the university setting. What else is presenting itself as a challenge for you? And, you know, in any, in any kind of position, administrative position like your, your work with the Interdisciplinary Studies, you're really glad to have some challenges because it means you've got, got a job, but, but you don't want to have so many challenges that that that they sort of push you out of out of the work completely.

PM: Yeah. No. Yeah. All of that. So yeah. I mean, the biggest challenge I think is not student interest and not faculty interest. I take most of the challenges to be actually structural. And the difficulty here is navigating interdisciplinarity in a place like Baylor that doesn't seem like interdisciplinary is competing with disciplines. And so especially when hiring determinations and, and essentially revenue streams return back to departments. How do we get departments to think of what they do as also contributing to things bigger than their own vision? Or how do they think--How can we invite departments to think about their vision as also part of a larger vision and not in competition with, with kind of their own achievements? And so thinking of something like Areas Studies, for example, it's great if places like the History department, Modern Languages and Cultures, Political Science, Religion, I mean you name it. The partners that contribute faculty here—you can bring faculty on campus that are great interdisciplinarily, but can contribute to something that's also outside of or adjacent to the discipline without competing with the department. Because there's no faculty lines otherwise. And our students are--how should we say--our students need these and want these. And so the difficulty first is structural in terms of the hiring practices. Second--what else would I say about the structural things? I would say also then, I mean, with the hiring goes the funding. And so there's no money for...I mean, that should, in some way, that's self-evident. And part of the difficulty in humanities is just our habits of thinking. Because in the sciences, everybody's very comfortable recognizing their limits. So if you need somebody who does X and you don't do X, you reach out and you work together on these ways. In humanities sometimes--and this is describing myself as much as, as much as many of my colleagues--we naturally think there's a lot of things we can do beyond our expertise because we're good critical thinkers. And so we're not so much skills-based as some of the things in the sciences. And so our vulnerability is in play if we, if we have to think these ways. And so getting right down to the way individual faculty members contribute, and they're all with the best of intentions, are sometimes very nervous because it calls into question what we do know. And when you spend your whole life working on sorts of things that you want to get right, and then recognizing or having to ask other people, well, do I have this right? Sometimes can be difficult,

CR: Right, yes. I mean, even just as kind of, somewhat something of an example, you know, it's one thing for, for theologians to publish and present on, on something in Augustine's thought, for instance. And you sort of, you know, what the conversation will be, you know what the questions might be, what the critiques might be. But it's a very different thing if a theologian talking about something in Augustine's thought, then starts working with a political scientist who's looked at the same thing. And then all of a sudden you get questions that you never expected. You get critiques that come out of nowhere. You're supposed to think on your feet, right?

PM: Yeah. And that's, and that's all kind of natural and--the disposition--And I think this is generally true of my colleagues--that disposition is absolutely We all want to learn. But sometimes it's hard for us to re-learn that maybe we don't have the best perspective or the only perspective on these things. And how do we then incorporate what we think is important in ways that may or may not be valued by other disciplines? And, and navigating that the collaborations in this respect are sometimes, well, navigating people. And that is, for all of us, sometimes a challenge.

CR: That's right. So on the other side here, what are the bright spots? What are the wins that, that you've, you've been able to collect or what are the, what are the opportunities right on the horizon?

PM: I mean, I think, I think all of the interdisciplinary programs that Baylor has are wins. The energy that faculty have for these things and the love they have for not only their discipline, but, but communicating it and for students to embrace it and to move, and to move past that, and to be better than we are. I mean, ultimately that's, that's what we want for our students in all respects. I see that across the board. And so there is a deep sense in which our faculty are committed in the deepest way

to what's best for our students,. And the willingness to shape programs and to, and to reach--I mean, to really stretch out and imagine things like Medical Humanities, things like Women and Gender Studies, things like the Digital Humanities Initiative, that are always more work for them. And so the bright spots are absolutely there now. And I also think that recently the administration through the COACHE Survey has recognized that faculty are more interested in these things than perhaps perceived. And it's kind of critically engaging these, these questions and facilitating discourse. And all of that's to the good. We're all kind of impatient, waiting to see what, what comes out of these conversations. But I think we're all at least relatively optimistic that there's, there's new opportunities and new realities at Baylor that are that are going to facilitate possibilities that we haven't imagined before.

CR: So I want to finish by talking about the student experience a little bit more here. You, you mentioned that students are hungry for these kinds of things. They're eager. They want these kinds of learning opportunities. How are students enriched, how are they challenged by interdisciplinary study?

PM: It's a good question. Yeah. I'm, I'm hoping our students are challenged and enriched by all of the programs we do. So. I don't want to pit interdisciplinary against, against others. What I want to say is, I hope it helps them self-consciously integrate the things they are learning. And to self-consciously become better human beings because of it, rather than accumulators of data and knowledge. I'm excited to watch our students become whole people that integrate these multiple perspectives that they engage here and become complex human beings that are navigating a world that we couldn't have imagined when we were their age.

CR: Right. And if I, if I remember correctly, you have, you have taught this interdisciplinary course-- and I don't think you're you've taught it in maybe a couple of years--but the Freshwater?

PM: Yeah

CR: So say a little bit about that course and how, what you actually saw students are wrestling with.

PM: That was a pilot course led by some faculty in the School of Education and Museum Studies. And in a variety of us were, were part of, part of kind of just contributors to this course. It was fantastic and an interesting and frustrating, I think for all of us in different ways. And I think what we had was a preliminary attempt to present students with multiple perspectives on what water looks like in Texas. And it focused on the Brazos River. How was the Brazos, what, what is the Brazos River to Texas? So of course it's, it's environmental. Of course, it's social. Of course, that's cultural, of course is part of the imagination. It's political. And so I think that the beautiful thing is you've had a bunch of faculty in the same room trying to sort out, "okay, what do we want to cover here? What do we want to say, why do we want to say this as opposed to this?" I think in the first iteration, we probably, it was much more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. I could be wrong about that. But I think for the first go we were we were just trying to sort out our own kind of well, our own limitations in this conversation and how to respond to all of these other perspectives that we knew were there, but we've never tried to articulate kind of our own discipline in relation to. I think it would take one or two more times to really do it well. But I think students really enjoyed it. And we had lots of experience on the river itself. And so there's a sense in which it was also kind of experiential learning, which, which is by definition again interdisciplinary. So yeah, I mean it was wonderful. It was great to get to know a bunch of faculty I wouldn't have otherwise met. I think the students really were challenged and, and forced to do some of the work that I think we could've probably done better. That's on us, but we're all trying.

CR: Right. All right. Well, Paul Martens, thank you so much for joining the show today and for your sharing your insights with us. We really appreciate it.

PM: Thanks, Christopher, appreciate it.