

*Reprint*

**Bill Newell Announces Retirement  
as AIS Executive Director:  
Tributes and Testimonials**

by

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***Preamble:** The following reprint of an earlier tribute to Bill Newell published in the AIS newsletter, Integrative Pathways, in September of 2016, continues to honor him after his passing on the 27th of April 2019, after a long battle with cancer. Upon learning of his passing, former AIS president Steve Gottlieb remembered Bill with a personal fondness others also expressed, along with respect for his work of many years. Others highlighted his generosity in making newcomers to AIS feel welcome, expressing genuine interest in their work and continuing to mentor them. The obituary that follows, written by Bill's daughter Silvia, accompanied by the wonderful photo that graced the cover of the Festschrift in his honor that Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies published last year, tallies his accomplishments, dedication to the field of interdisciplinary studies, love for his family and friends, and appetite for life. Everyone who contributed to the tribute upon Bill's stepping down from his position as Executive Director of AIS joins in keeping his memory alive and continuing his work. We thank the journal editors, Gretchen Schulz and Sven Arvidson, for their invitation to reprint the newsletter tribute, which appears in its original format including verb tenses in the present.*

Julie Thompson Klein, Wayne State University

Former president of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Ray Miller put it best: "There would be no AIS without Bill." After serving as Executive Director for 24 years, and de facto Executive Director for another

nine, the venerable William H. Newell retired from his position in summer of 2016. Over the course of his career, Newell was instrumental in advancing interdisciplinary studies, beginning with the launching of AIS in 1979. To honor him, current members of the AIS Board and former presidents offered testimonials, joined by former editor of the journal, *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies* [formerly *Issues in Integrative Studies*], Stan Bailis.

### **Bill Newell the Professor and the Executive Director**



Bill Newell is Emeritus Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Miami University and a founding faculty member of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies, known originally as the Western College Program. He holds a PhD in economics from the University of Pennsylvania and an AB in philosophy from Amherst College. Prior to his appointment at Miami University, Newell taught economics and interdisciplinary social science for a year at Temple University and was a tutor for four years in the Paracollege at St. Olaf College. Over the course of his career, he edited two books – the 1998 *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature* and the 2012 *Case Studies in Interdisciplinary Research* (with Allen Repko and Rick Szostak) – as well as three special issues of the AIS journal. He also authored more than 30 articles and chapters, while serving as a consultant and external evaluator over 100 times.

In recognition of these accomplishments, AIS conferred the highest honor for interdisciplinarians on Newell in 2003, the Kenneth E. Boulding Award, which recognizes major and long-term contributions to advancing interdisciplinarity through teaching, scholarship, and/or community involvement. Bill's qualifications for the Award are evident in even a glimpse of his duties as Executive Director:

- Providing Leadership: conferring with the AIS Leadership Team, the Board, and standing committees about projects and administrative matters;
- Maintaining Organizational Records: managing routine business and correspondence, tax records, the treasury, the website domain, and the INTERDIS listserv;
- Managing the AIS Office: administering the original AIS home at Miami University in Ohio and transitioning to the new home base at Oakland University in Michigan;
- Overseeing Outreach: handling affiliations with organizations

and networks with related interests including general and liberal studies, team science, transdisciplinary research, and integration and implementation sciences;

- Training Consultants: offering workshops prior to and at annual conferences and training new prospects for the AIS consulting team.

As Ray Miller emphasized, his duties also included sustained support for all publications. Bill served as editor of the newsletter for many years, edited the journal on multiple occasions, and, Ray added, “facilitated the actual printing when other options were lost.” An even fuller picture emerges when appreciating Bill’s role as founder and anchor of AIS.

### **Bill Newell the Founder and Organizational Anchor**

Veterans of the early years of AIS recalled its founding. Former president Tom Murray came to know Newell as a colleague in the Western College Program. From the beginning, Murray remembered, “His energy, enthusiasm, and determination were astounding.” Their conversations nurtured a combination of intellectual companionship and personal friendship that current president Machiel Keestra praised as well, recollecting countless conversations Machiel and Bill had ranging from AIS business to music, basketball, and family life. Murray’s successor as president, Tom Benson, also recalled Bill’s success in recruiting and motivating others to join his vision for AIS: “He found a way to enlist us in his cause and it became our own.” Bill’s personality, Benson added, stood out: “He was witty, sometimes brash, energetic, insightful, and deeply devoted to the development of the AIS.” When considering the long list of presidents and board members over 37 years, Benson concluded, Bill’s “visionary work in founding and sustaining a unique and valuable organization sets him apart,” and indeed “forms the heart of his exceptional legacy.”

Another founding member and president of AIS, Nelson Bingham, recounted Bill’s determination to provide a forum for interdisciplinary studies. The idea appealed to many but, Bingham stressed, there is “no doubt that the core vision sprang from Bill’s mind.” In the late 1970s, Nelson recalled, a growing number of professional organizations embodied interdisciplinary approaches with a topical focus, utilizing methods of various disciplines and theoretical models. Yet, overlaps and communication were lacking across organizations. AIS was the first group to focus on integration, and Bill, Bingham added, was the “constant thread running through all activities” – in essence “the DNA of AIS.” Its vitality today, Nelson concluded, “is a direct reflection of Bill’s

commitment and boundless energy in enacting that vision.”

Ray Miller, who has known Newell since 1981, likewise highlighted his steadfast personal commitment to the organization: “When other people dropped the ball, Bill was there.” When another former president, Carolyn Haynes, announced a strategic planning retreat in 2003 to consider what to do in the event he stepped down as Executive Director, Ray told her the purpose of strategic planning should be “finding the 15 competent and dedicated people who would be needed when Bill eventually retired.”

### **Bill Newell the Mentor**

An even fuller picture emerges from tributes to Newell’s mentoring. Cheryl Jacobsen, another former president, called to mind numerous conferences, Board meetings, workshops, a shared consultancy, and the strategic planning retreat marked by heady theorizing laced with memories of 1970s idealism, youthful antics, and breaking “disciplinary rules” – all capped by Bill’s signature love of good wine. For Jacobsen, AIS became a welcoming professional and personal community and Bill in particular, she remembered, “opened the door to my greater involvement in other higher education organizations.” He also encouraged scholarly projects that led Cheryl to “a more nuanced understanding of how disciplines and interdisciplinarity ‘work’ within institutions.”

Others, as well, paid tribute to Newell’s help and encouragement in their early days of involvement. Former president Pauline Gagnon recalled being a newly minted Director of Interdisciplinary Studies. By her own admission, Gagnon had no concept of what that title meant. The IDS Reader Bill created for the Institute in Integrative Studies that he ran from 1992-1998 proved invaluable. Like Pauline, outgoing Board member Marcus Tanner also admitted having “no idea what I was doing or really what was expected of me” when he arrived at Texas Tech University. Hired on July 1st, Marcus had to prepare a series of four courses in an Integrative Studies program to begin August 25th. When they met for the first time, Marcus was struck by how Bill made him feel part of the organization, introducing him to others, and motivating him to make significant changes to the curriculum.

Outgoing Board member Tami Carmichael joined the others in praising Newell’s mentoring, in a unique and compelling memory. Carmichael had read Bill’s work for years, but did not interact personally until he rejected an article she submitted to *Issues*. The rejection, however, was so “thorough and helpful” it informed her revision of a component of the first-year interdisciplinary program at the University of North Dakota. The revision

also led to a new assessment program building on data about the success of interdisciplinary learning and eventually an article in *Issues*. Moreover, Tami was able to make persuasive arguments for her program's survival in the face of budget shortfalls and continued to benefit from Bill's feedback on a variety of professional endeavors. His mentoring, she concluded, "made all the difference" to both her professional development and the life of the first-year program.

Former president Karen Moranski also paid tribute to Bill's role as a mentor. Like others she described as those "who have toiled in the vineyards of interdisciplinary research and teaching," Moranski found the anthology of readings he published to be invaluable. Her own copy was passed around campus so many times it fell apart but, with the aid of rubber bands, Karen said eloquently, Bill taught them "how to do interdisciplinarity with purpose, discipline(s), and integrity." When she and her colleagues were floundering to create a new interdisciplinary general education curriculum, Newell teamed with Joan Fiscella, arriving on campus as "a tall IDS Mr. Fix-It." Together they "firmly but always collegially turned our program around," including resuscitating courses that were still going strong 14 years later. The richness and depth of interdisciplinary integration from students' first to senior years, Karen added, is a testament to Bill's influences as a mentor as well as a teacher and a scholar.

### **Bill Newell the Man**

The full measure of individuals lies in the composite of their defining qualities. Several stand out. Former president and current member of the Leadership Team, Roz Schindler, told Bill in remarks shared for this story, "You have truly been the heart, mind, soul, and conscience of AIS," combining breadth and depth of commitment over decades with skills of connection-making and mentoring. Reflecting on the multiple qualities he too observed, Stan Bailis acknowledged, it is "not an easy bundle of attributes to have." Although he had worked with Bill more than a decade, Stan really came to know him during spring semester of 1994 when he was a visiting professor in the Western College Program. Spending time together almost every day afforded a complete picture of a man who was "smart, focused, determined, devoted, and tireless." Working together closely also gave Stan an understanding of how Bill expresses those attributes in everything he does: "everything" from founding AIS to nurturing it through the decades to this day.

The word "inspiration" also stood out. Marcus Tanner credited Newell's seminal work and demeanor as "a great inspiration to me professionally and

personally.” Nelson Bingham dubbed him a role model for a professional vocation dedicated to integrating scholarship, pedagogy, and application with personal networks of friendships and fellowship. And, current editor of the AIS newsletter James Welch wrote, Bill “epitomized what an interdisciplinarian can be.” Current Board member Tanya Augsburg, in turn, cited his spirit of intellectual curiosity: “Bill could always be seen at AIS roaming the halls, intrigued by new ideas and theories about interdisciplinarity.” In her particular case, Tanya valued Bill’s encouragement when she was a lecturer trying to write the first edition of her 2005 textbook *Becoming Interdisciplinary*, and continuing afterwards: “His sage wisdom and problem solving skills helped me overcome some challenging ‘politics of interdisciplinary studies.’”

The qualities of “generosity” and “kindness” were striking as well. Pauline Gagnon attributed Bill’s generosity to “a willingness to help you address questions and concerns no matter where you were from or what you knew.” Long-standing members, including former president Michael Field, benefited from Bill’s encouragement, in Michael’s case guiding him “to expand interests in academic assessment of interdisciplinary programs, work collaboratively with AIS colleagues, and find connections between individuals and areas of study.” Bill’s generosity, former president Rick Szostak added, extended to paying for graduate students’ dinners at conferences and infusing Board meetings with bottles of wine from his personal cellar. Pauline added “kindness,” a quality new Board member Heidi Upton echoed. Bill’s kindness towards Heidi at midyear Board meetings and openness on all occasions made her feel included. Reading other tributes from the early history of AIS for this story also made Heidi appreciate more deeply “his passion for teaching and learning and the spaces in-between.”

And the beat goes on, across generations... Like others, former president Don Stowe recalled being “thrust unwittingly into the world of interdisciplinarity,” during the early 1980s when the Provost at the University of South Carolina declared all general studies programs in the system would henceforth be called “interdisciplinary studies programs.” With some trepidation Don contacted Bill, only to discover quickly, as



*Bill Newell (right) and former AIS president Michael Field enjoy some wine in the early days of AIS. Newell is retiring after 24 years as Executive Director of AIS.*

others have, Bill was approachable: “He had the heart and soul of a master teacher.” Don added, “He was never too busy to review ideas, offer thoughts, and carefully nurture me along the way. He was and is a master mentor.” Don has had the pleasure, too, of watching Bill welcome his son, Drew Stowe, into the “intellectual web” of AIS, as Drew moved from being a graduate student member to an assistant professor now.

James Welch concurred with Don’s sense of being put at ease. As a self-described “naïve grad student,” he was surprised by Newell’s accessibility, even shocked Bill engaged him in prolonged conversation. James also came to appreciate that openness is a hallmark of AIS, shaped in no small part by Bill’s determination to make the organization into more than a forum and platform for interdisciplinarity, to make it a place to flourish. Interdisciplinary, Welch reflected, “are often eclectic, eccentric, and perhaps even erratic.” But, AIS became a home that “prizes open-mindedness, mutual respect, and support.” James also found Bill’s vision of interdisciplinarity to be “a powerful approach to knowledge and complex problem solving,” amplified by exploring theoretical implications in a manner that would balance “the imperative for open-mindedness and diversity with the need for structure and cohesion.” This balancing act is not without controversy, but it offered a framework for deep and productive debate within the AIS community about the nature and practice of interdisciplinary studies.

Traits associated with “tenacity” also stood out. Szostak declared AIS “would simply not exist without Bill’s tireless dedication over four decades.” His intellectual leadership played a key role, Rick explained, “in helping to define interdisciplinarity, seek its defining characteristics, and identify strategies for integration.” Comparably, former president Joan Fiscella highlighted the enduring strength of Bill’s “vision and conviction,” grounded in a keen sense of what the organization should be while remaining open to suggestions as new members arrived. Bill always sought ways to involve them, identifying new candidates for reviewing books and writing stories for the newsletter. In her case, Joan added, AIS was also a welcoming professional home when she was making a personal transition to a career in academic libraries. Szostak pointed to an added trait of tenacity as well, remembering Bill could be “notoriously stubborn in Board meetings,” insisting on clarity and cogent



analysis without sacrificing professional and personal relationships. “A great heart and strong mind,” Rick reflected, “are a powerful combination.” Moranski cited the same quality: “He stubbornly and persistently demands from all of us our best interdisciplinary and integrative thinking while wining and dining us with his intellect and humanity.”

Current Board member Gretchen Schulz added the value of collaboration. Taking a cue from the Summer 2016 Rio Olympics, she cited Michael Phelps saying, after winning his final race, “Thanks, Coach.” His coach helped him learn to enjoy collaboration with members of the relay team in that race, appreciating joint effort more than solo achievements alone. Schulz drew a parallel to her career in English, where solo achievements in teaching, publishing, and presenting at conferences were prioritized. Over several decades, though, she experienced collaboration in the world of theater, mounting Shakespeare plays, then becoming involved in AIS. When asked to chair a committee to investigate introducing interdisciplinary coursework on her campus, Gretchen persuaded colleagues to attend one of Bill’s summer institutes. “Coach Newell” guided them, and others, in working together on challenges they faced. Gretchen subsequently co-hosted an annual conference at Emory University and is now co-editing the AIS journal aided by Bill’s counsel. Like Michael Field, who came to “recognize the pleasure and simple fun of working with others on complex problems,” Gretchen has been the beneficiary of what she called the “Newell Nurturing Technique.”

My personal sense of the man echoes dual qualities others have identified: steadfast commitment to his vision coupled with generosity towards newcomers. When a former colleague of mine at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, Nepal visited the US to learn about interdisciplinary programs, Bill responded graciously to my query about whether he, Shreedhar Lohani, might spend a short time in residence at Miami University. When Shreedhar heard Bill and I had been invited to co-author the chapter on interdisciplinary studies for the 1996 *Handbook on the Undergraduate Curriculum*, he remarked, “How is that possible? The two of you don’t agree on anything.” Bill and I shared a common passion for interdisciplinarity. But we had different trajectories: his centered on activities that advanced AIS as a dedicated professional organization and mine evolving across inter- and trans-disciplinary networks and literatures. We worked together, though, on a number of AIS projects, and the chapter for the *Handbook* reflects the strength that comes of working together on a common goal. Moreover, as vicissitudes of life confronted us personally, our friendship has been a bedrock, even as Shreedhar would have predicted we continue to spar on our intellectual differences.

Finally...what next? As AIS refigures the Leadership Team in the wake of Newell's retirement, it will be making a step Bill himself described in his formal letter of resignation, moving "from gestation and infancy to maturation." Even though he is stepping away from the directorship and the team, however, he will continue to serve as a reviewer for the journal and as treasurer until a replacement is named. Beyond that, it is not difficult to imagine Don Stowe's image of the future: "Henceforth I look forward to watching Bill move quickly and purposefully among all the participants at conferences – welcoming them, listening to their concerns, inviting them to delve more deeply into the realm of interdisciplinarity and ultimately inspiring some to bring us to new levels of appreciation and understanding of that ubiquitous term, 'interdisciplinarity.'" So do we all.

**Biographical Note:** JULIE THOMPSON KLEIN is Professor of Humanities Emerita in the English Department at Wayne State University. She has also been a Visiting Foreign Professor at Shimane University in Japan, a Fulbright professor in Nepal, Foundation Visitor at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, Mellon Fellow and Visiting Professor of Digital Humanities at the University of Michigan, and a Distinguished Women's Scholar at the University of Victoria. Holder of a PhD in English from the University of Oregon, Klein is past president of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies and a recipient of the Kenneth Boulding Award for outstanding scholarship on interdisciplinarity. Her authored and co-edited books include *Interdisciplinarity* (1990), *Interdisciplinary Studies Today* (1994), *Crossing Boundaries* (1996), *Transdisciplinarity* (2001), *Interdisciplinary Education in K-12 and College* (2002), *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity* (2005), *Creating Interdisciplinary Campus Cultures* (2010), and *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities* (2015). She was also Associate Editor of the *Oxford Handbook on Interdisciplinarity* (2010, 2017) and is co-editor of the University of Michigan Press series *Digital Humanities@digitalculturebooks*.

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