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Preface to Special Issue on Interdisciplinary Resources

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"INTERDISCIPLINARITY" is hard to define. It refers to numerous practices that, mixing different sets of specialties, only resemble each other in a family way — variously, not uniformly, with respect to their identifying traits. Moreover, the term refers to practices that are always emerging as fresh combinations of materials usually seen separately in specialized fields. What to do with a term that lacks stable, identical referents?

These definitional difficulties do not unduly trouble those of us who see "interdisciplinarity" as the general name for a collection of vital complements to the specializing clan of universities. But the same difficulties do give others a sense that "interdisciplinarity" designates indefinite, transient practices not necessary to serious instruction and inquiry. This sense of our definitional difficulties is trouble.

Ostension cannot completely solve the problem of definition. But pointing to substantial bodies of knowledge that are instances of interdisciplinarity can substantiate its worth. This is best done by pointing to materials that answer deliberate questions: What is interdisciplinarity in a liberal arts major? In a scholarly literature? In a curriculum design? In academic program administration? In a listing of professional organizations? Such are the questions addressed in this *ISSUES*.

The papers collected here are called a resource because interdisciplinarians will find them useful in everyday pursuits. A less ordinary, more pressing use of the volume is as a persuasive instrument with people who are

not doing interdisciplinary work but who are responsible for decisions about it: deans, provosts, trustees, legislators — all do receive proposals on behalf of “interdisciplinarity,” and all may properly ask to be shown what it is. These essays respond effectively by pointing to definite embodiments of the kinds of work that the term intends.

We are proud to add this special volume to the line of *ISSUES*. We hope it will be used as well as it has been made.