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Why Clusters?

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Office of the President

Why Clusters?

April 20th, 2016 by Don Birx

Many people around campus ask me “why clusters?”

As I see it, there are seven drivers for clusters and this post explains the first. In future posts, I will detail the other six and how a university arrives at clusters that are best suited for it.

Years ago (when the pillars of the liberal arts were first established) it was believed that if an individual studied seven (to nine) subject areas they would have the tools they needed to learn, succeed, grow, and interact with the world around them. In other words they would be fully equipped with an integrated perspective embodying:

- exploration and discovery (astronomy, biology)
- communication (grammar, rhetoric, and mathematics)
- art and technology (geometry and music)

Subject areas were added as our knowledgebase expanded and some differentiation occurred, but one was always expected to have an integrated perspective that came from some knowledge of all the key pillars of the liberal arts. However, it was during the last two centuries that a strong focus on discipline-based skills developed following the German model that gave us deep probes into specific disciplines at the expense of a broader integrated perspective of knowledge. It was a very successful approach for a long time resulting in some incredible breakthroughs, but after a time, the benefits started to accrue more slowly and our knowledge, instead of taking leaps became incremental.

It became obvious to many, even in the scientific community, that thinking across disciplinary boundaries was where the great discoveries and insights were to be found in the 21st century.

Meanwhile, the liberal arts had become increasingly fragmented (following their scientific cousins), and in an attempt to overcome the narrowness of perspective, the concept of general education was introduced. I say introduced, because it represented a valiant but flawed attempt to give a perspective that addressed the concerns of specialization with the goal of creating a well-rounded and learned individual. In my view, it did not yield an integrated perspective but was often a smorgasbord of areas of study in which the student picked a course or two here or there with no understanding of how all these courses were relevant to their interests or core studies. This is a hard environment in which to learn and an even harder environment to teach. *What if we could make it better?*

So how do we go about recreating an integrated perspective that was so valued by the originators of the liberal arts, and has become so important to the resurgence of our processes of discovery, lifelong learning, and the production of well-rounded and fully-equipped individuals in an age of so much specialized knowledge?

The answer for me came as I grappled with:

- what I was seeing in the National Academy
- what my experience was with how problems were being solved outside of the Academy

- disappointment I had with the pace that discoveries were being made because of the narrowness of the graduate students entering our research programs

I concluded that it is next to impossible to:

- think critically
- communicate effectively
- work together synergistically if one did not know how to integrate what one had learned and had worked with and knew how to link up with others who had different interests to solve our multidisciplinary challenges

What developed was the idea of clusters and associated open laboratories.

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