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# Trend or Transition: A Report on Interdisciplinary Work in the 2013-2014 Academic Job Market for the Humanities and Social Sciences

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## **Trend or Transition: A Report on Interdisciplinary Work in the 2013-2014 Academic Job Market for the Humanities and Social Sciences**

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### **Prepared for:**

Dedman College Interdisciplinary Institute, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

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### **Preface**

In order to foster interdisciplinary experiences for advanced graduate students, the Dedman College Interdisciplinary Institute at Southern Methodist University established the Graduate Fellows Program for the 2014-2015 academic year. This program brought together students from across the three divisions of Dedman College (Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences) to participate in wide ranging discussions about interdisciplinarity scholarship, ably facilitated by Dr. Katherine Engel (Department of Religious Studies). We were also charged with developing a collaborative project. We homed in on the two interests we could all agree on: we wanted to learn more about interdisciplinary work and we all want a job after we graduate. We conducted research into how all this talk about interdisciplinary work actually connects to academic employment through a content analysis of job advertisements in the humanities and social sciences for the 2013 and 2014 hiring cycles. On May 7, 2015 this report was presented to the Dedman College Interdisciplinary Institute and members of the Dedman College faculty and administration. We thank the Dedman College Interdisciplinary Institute for providing us the opportunity to participate in this enriching experience, and particularly Dr. Katherine Engel for her support and encouragement. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Dedman College Interdisciplinary Institute or Southern Methodist University.

*Questions, correspondence, and requests for the underlying dataset can be directed to Michael Aiuvalasit, [maiuvalasit@smu.edu](mailto:maiuvalasit@smu.edu)*

## Introduction

Is interdisciplinary work just a trend, a buzzword? Does it merely signal the demand for flexible labor, civility in academic institutions, or is it another symptom of the “slow death of the university”<sup>1</sup>? The 2014-2015 Graduate Fellows at Southern Methodist University’s Dedman Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies spent a year meeting and discussing what it means to do interdisciplinary (ID) scholarship. We found we had two common interests: we all wanted to do interdisciplinary research, and we all eventually want jobs. While the four humanities students were discussing various hypotheses regarding the “hype”<sup>2</sup> around interdisciplinary studies and our futures on the job market, the social scientist and statistician in the group eventually interrupted to ask a simple question: what data could we find to better understand how the buzz around interdisciplinary work relates to academic employment? To find some actual hard data, we turned to one of the only sources of information about employment we graduate students can access: job ads.

Job ads are rarely pieces of text begging for critical analysis. Nevertheless, they are the primary point of interaction between hiring committees and applicants. And while it seems not every committee truly commits to crafting rich narratives in their ads, you can be certain that eager job applicants scrutinize these texts as deeply as any piece of literature. Therefore, as young interdisciplinary scholars soon to be on the job market, we wanted to understand how the term “interdisciplinary” is employed in the hiring process. Does the invocation of the term “interdisciplinary” reveal anything about what kinds of work might be available to us in the academy? More broadly, does it reveal anything about how universities are currently considering interdisciplinary work, and how that might impact our own graduate studies?

## Research Design and Methods

To address these questions we conducted a content analysis of academic job announcements that used the term “interdisciplinary.” Content analysis as undertaken here involved the quantification and analysis of the presence, meanings, and relationships of qualities of interdisciplinary scholarship in job ads. A few basic suppositions drove our analysis. First, we were interested to see whether the schools touting interdisciplinary work had actually created institutional space for it on their campuses. This point was an important one for us, since the same qualities making a candidate appear strong from an interdisciplinary perspective might make the same person appear weak as a specialist within a discipline. When a school officially houses interdisciplinarity on its campus, it explicitly commits itself to new approaches to knowledge and guards against letting unconventional scholars fall through the cracks. Second, we carefully dissected exactly what sorts of interdisciplinary training the ads required. In doing so, we were operating under the assumption that institutions seeking the most deeply interdisciplinary work would call for it with the greatest specificity in the candidate’s research. As we had neither access nor time to cover a large portion of job ads across all disciplines, we decided to use H-Net: Humanities

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<sup>1</sup> “The Slow Death of the University” (<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Slow-Death-of-the/228991>)

<sup>2</sup> “Interdisciplinary Hype” (<http://chronicle.com/article/Interdisciplinary-Hype/49191/>)

and Social Sciences Online<sup>3</sup>. This interdisciplinary organization hosts a job guide with thousands of job advertisements from across the humanities and social sciences. Like any database, H-Net has some limitations: schools have to pay \$190 to post a job, and some disciplines seem to be underrepresented. Despite these limitations, we determined that H-Net includes enough advertisements to provide a representative sample of humanities and social science jobs.

We focused on the two most recent academic hiring cycles, 2013-2014, setting as our timeframe job ads between 1 November 2013 to 18 December 2014. We further limited our search to the types of jobs that most closely match our interests: assistant professor-level, tenure-track jobs that used the term “interdisciplinary.” Although there were nearly 3,000 jobs posted on H-Net during this period, these restrictions limited our analysis to a manageable 200 job ads. For each job listing, we coded basic information: the type of institution; whether the hiring department was connected to an interdisciplinary institute; where the term “interdisciplinary” was used in the ad (title, body, keyword, or multiple places); and what ID described (department, institution, candidate, or some combination). We then analyzed the demands of the position with five more categories reflecting the range of traits desired in interdisciplinary scholarship: research methodology, topic, teaching, publication, and collaboration. Each of these categories received a numerical value from 0-2, with 0 being not ID at all, 1 being weakly ID and 2 being highly ID. Categories with weakly interdisciplinary scores merely mentioned an interdisciplinary trait as being desired in a candidate, but provided no details on interdisciplinary demands. Highly interdisciplinary scores were given for categories where interdisciplinary work was specifically mentioned and/or emphasized in the job announcement. By combining the numerical values for all five categories, we created an “interdisciplinary score” (ID SCORE), ranging from 0 to 10. Jobs ads could then be grouped together as being “low” ID (0-2), “medium” ID (3-6), or “high” ID (7-10).

To reduce error and bias in our coding, we created a glossary for our terms and measures. We also coded a batch of ten job listings together, and then used quantitative analyses of our results to self-correct our coding process. We partnered up to discuss issues with coding, and we flagged problematic or confusing advertisements to discuss with the entire group. The advantage to generating quantitative measures is that we could use descriptive statistics and exploratory analyses, as well as more sophisticated statistical tests of dependence to engage our questions and hypotheses. For instance, by generating an overall ID score, we were able to determine that the overall pattern adheres to a normal distribution, with most jobs falling in the medium category (**Figure 1**), suggesting that the 200 jobs we analyzed reflect the range of uses of the term interdisciplinary in the humanities and social sciences.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.h-net.org/jobs/home.php>



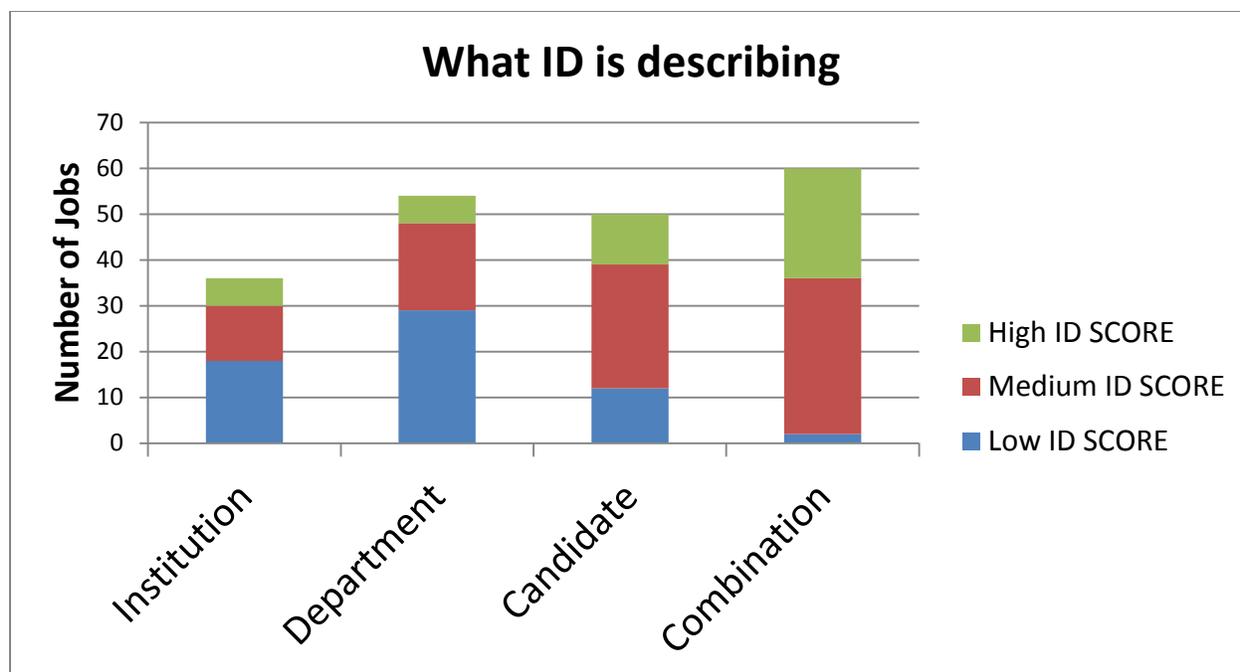
**Figure 1. Distribution of ID scores.**

## Results

The results of our analysis are presented as answers to the series of questions we posed in the introduction:

*When is ID used in a job ad as a buzzword?*

If ID is being used as a buzzword, we would expect job ads to have low ID scores and to use the term to describe something other than the duties of the job candidate. **Figure 2** shows how ID scores are related to what the term ID is used to describe. We found that 45% of all the listings (n=90) use ID to describe the institution or department and not the candidate. Low ID scores make up the majority of the cases where ID is used in that way (n=47). Low ID scores reveal that the ads give no indication that ID scholarship is demanded for the position. An ad that talks about an “interdisciplinary” department or institution can be a sign of “buzz” as it is correlated with having a low ID score: one might not need any ID training or experience to work within a school or department that dubs itself interdisciplinary. The opposite is true for jobs where ID is used to refer to the candidate or some combination thereof. Medium and High ID scores make up 87% of the scores in these cases, which strongly suggests that job ads referring ID to the candidate are demanding ID scholars.



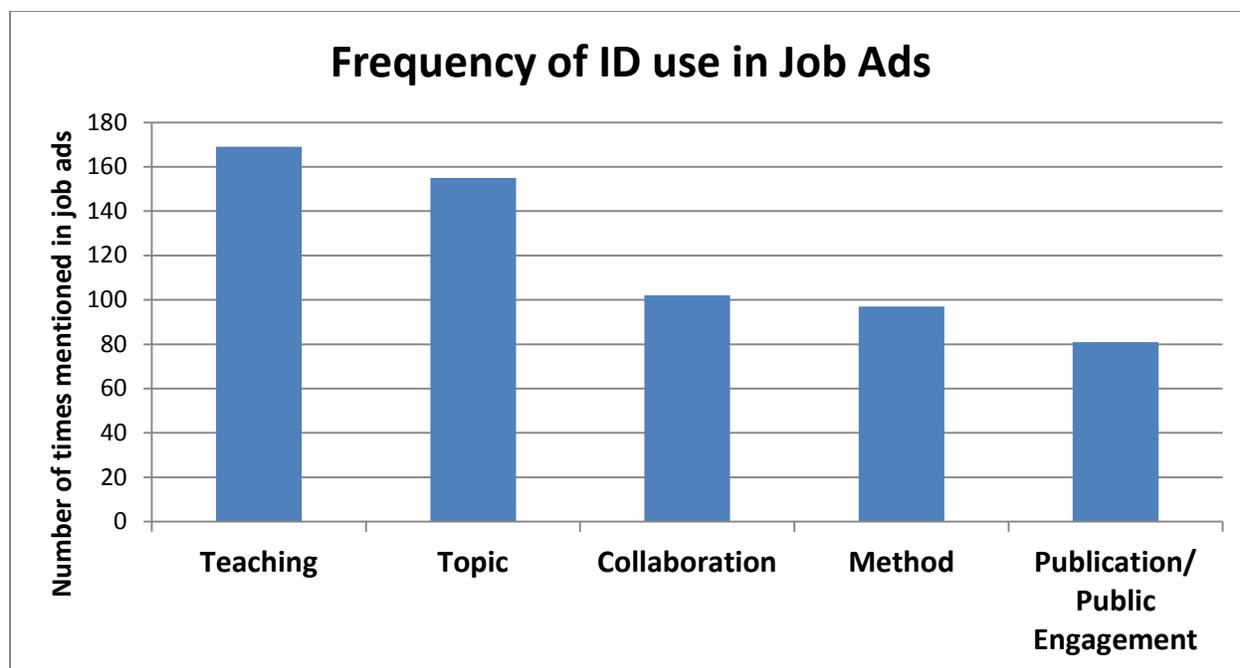
**Figure 2. Stacked bar chart of what is being described as ID in the 200 job ads.**

*What ID traits are desired by hiring committees, and how do these traits compare to definitions of ID?*

In most definitions of interdisciplinary scholarship, “topic” alone is insufficient to characterize interdisciplinary work. Instead recent ID definitions emphasize multiple skillsets, practices, and abilities encompassed in a combination of the five interdisciplinary traits we coded<sup>4</sup>. We found this to be the case in job announcements. We found (using Chi-squared tests for independence) that having a high “topic” score (1-2) was correlated to having a higher ID score ( $p < 2.2e-16$ ), and conversely that there is no correlation between high topic ID values and low teaching values ( $p = 2.659e-05$ ). The findings therefore suggest that job ads that have a higher marking for ID topic also emphasize other skillsets and practices (method, teaching, publication), and do reflect the definition, and demands of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Our study also found that interdisciplinary teaching, not topic, is the most frequently mentioned trait in job ads. Topic follows closely behind teaching, followed by collaboration, method, and publication/public engagement (**Figure 3**). A focus on teaching spans jobs from the lowest ID scores to those of the highest. The emphasis on teaching has implications towards the training of future ID-focused scholars, because graduate programs have not traditionally focused on extending opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching.

<sup>4</sup> Frodeman, Robert, ed. *Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.



**Figure 3. Frequency of ID categories used in job ads.**

*“Does the location of ID jobs within institutions reflect shifts in academia?”*

Interdisciplinarity has long been situated in departments of Area and Topical Studies, but a new trend is the development of Interdisciplinary Research Clusters and Institutes. ID Research Clusters or Institutes are mentioned in only 34% of all the job ads, but they make up 64% of jobs with High ID Scores. We found (using Chi-squared tests) a correlation between job ads with High ID Scores that are affiliated with ID Research Clusters ( $p=6.581e-06$ ), but no correlation between High ID scores and Area or Topical studies departments ( $p=0.4803$ ). While Area and Topical Studies departments may justify writing job announcements with little mention of ID because they are inherently interdisciplinary, the disparity between ID scores and traditional “studies” departments versus the new “ID clusters” may reflect a broader transformation in how and where interdisciplinary studies are taking place in higher institutions.

### **Interdisciplinarity as Contested Territory**

Given the contested nature of the term “interdisciplinary,” we focused on the use of the term as it related to the broad areas of a job candidate’s knowledge (method, topic) and practice (teaching, publication, collaboration). Following both some standard academic definitions of the term (especially the discussions in the *Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*) as well as our own findings, we can distinguish between technical uses of the term and more general uses. General uses refer to the low ID scores and involve more “multidisciplinary” activities that coordinate fields of knowledge. A more technical use of the term involves the transformation of fields and methods, and as such would involve higher ID scores as candidates must be able to move across methods and topics as they teach, publish, and coordinate with others. One of the most important things graduate students can do is learn to distinguish

between these uses of the term: the mere use of the term in the ad does not mean that the hiring committee is looking for someone who is genuinely transgressing or crossing disciplinary boundaries. They may just be looking for someone to co-teach core curriculum classes with someone from another department.

### **Reading the Interdisciplinary Job Market**

Graduate students wishing to market themselves for jobs calling for the general sense of interdisciplinarity--which make up the majority of interdisciplinary job ads--should seek a basic level of exposure to subjects outside their field. They should actively take advantage of departmental allowances for classes in areas outside their field of study. Depending on how clearly they have defined their research project upon entering graduate school, students might consider taking these extra-disciplinary classes especially towards the end of coursework, when the possible extra-disciplinary subjects necessary for their proposed area of study become clear.

Those job ads calling for the technical sort of interdisciplinarity sought candidates who could boast interdisciplinary experience far beyond mere exposure. These ads, associated with higher ID scores overall, wanted traits such as interdisciplinary methodologies (e.g. digital humanities training) and an interdisciplinary publication record as evidence of deep thinking between fields, alongside the more universally desired interdisciplinary teaching experience.

Graduate students looking to qualify for these types of jobs would need to have a clear sense of their career aims early on, and should begin taking advantage of the necessary training opportunities such jobs would require while already in coursework. For them to have the freedom and direction to do so would require an institution amenable to a course of study that, viewed through the lens of one discipline, might look unfocused or scattered--that is, un-disciplined.

Our research suggests that institutions fostering--or looking to foster--the most genuinely transformative interdisciplinary work are those that have created institutional space for it on their campuses. We wonder, given the extensive training required for the technical sort of interdisciplinarity called for in some job postings, if this means the most deeply interdisciplinary scholars will be trained at institutions with Interdisciplinary Institutes. If that is the case, and then those scholars become the most qualified candidates for jobs at other institutions with Interdisciplinary Institutes, we may see a coterie of interdisciplinary practitioners being shuttled back and forth between a select number of institutions within academia. As interdisciplinary study becomes more and more of a strict term, we may be seeing the processes that underlie the formation of new university subcultures.

We will have to live through this time of transition and upheaval to know where its paths may lead. Because our study focused on the most recent job cycles, we do not know who was hired for the 200 job ads we analyzed, their training, or the actual work they will be doing in their interdisciplinary positions. Still, we hope our study serves as an example for how graduate students entering the job market can systematically review job ads in their own disciplines to not only tailor their applications, but potentially their training to match the current demands in academic hiring. Finally, after spending so much time trying to parse meaning out of job ads written by so many different hiring committees, we urge those writing job ads to reflect on how to best convey what they want in a candidate, with as little buzz as possible.