Editors’ Introduction

We are proud to be the editors of this, the 30th volume of Issues in Integrative Studies, in part because it is the final volume to bear that title. The shift to Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies, which starts with the 2013 volume, acknowledges the change in the name of the organization publishing this journal to the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies. As longtime members will know, the change follows decades of discussion about the definitions of integrative and interdisciplinary work and the relationship between them. Though most would now agree that fully interdisciplinary work must be integrative of the insights offered by disciplines, a consensus reflected in the articles in this volume, debate on the particulars of the concepts and processes involved is likely to continue for decades to come, and that is reflected in these articles as well. We wouldn’t have it any other way.

We are also delighted by the range of the articles we have here—some focused on theory (though even the most theoretical can be useful in practice) and some focused on practice (though even the most practical connect meaningfully to theory). And we’d argue that the articles are pieces of high quality, too, a consequence of an unprecedented increase in submissions and an acceptance rate of only 20%.

In the opening article, “The Circulation of Knowledge as an Interdisciplinary Process: Travelling Concepts, Analogies, and Metaphors,” Swiss scholar Frédéric Darbellay draws on a rich francophone literature of which most American interdisciplinarians are largely unaware as he urges us to think systemically about interdisciplinary process in terms of how disciplines (and their practitioners) are starting to interact with each other and with interdisciplinary fields. He is one of very few interdisciplinarians to call for “protecting … in-depth disciplinary research” as “necessary for advancing cutting-edge knowledge,” though he is mindful of the dangers of “blind overspecialization” and celebrates those “who are beginning to look more carefully at the . . . limits of their own discipline and at ways of setting up new links with other disciplinary fields.” He presents the image of interdisciplinarian as nomad, moving into new territory with ideas and images that allow communication between insider and outsider where none was before. He describes his article as an “appeal for arbitrary borders between communities of subject specialists to be transcended . . . and for researchers to adopt an interdisciplinary outlook.”

William Abbott and Kathryn Nantz, the authors of our second article, “Building Students’ Integrative Thinking Capacities: A Case Study in
collecting data not from students currently in the program under study (as
and Assessment." Its approach is pragmatic, focusing on their experience
subtitle, "A Practical Rationale for and Guide to Post-Graduation Evaluation
Benjamin Brooks and Evan Widders offer a piece perfectly described by its
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work by Bill Newell showing that students in a specifically interdisciplinary
such capacity, but not claimed it. By way of contrast she cites earlier SOITL
development. Like Abbott and Nantz's students, they have moved
towards or towards that typifies the fourth or most advanced stage of
integration. This article on the developmental approach to teaching integration that they
have derived from their classroom experience represents the Scholarship of
Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning, SOITL, at its useful best.
Another fine piece of SOITL work is Jeannie Brown Leonard's article,
"Integrative Learning: A Grounded Theory," in which she draws upon
years of others' teaching (and resultant colleagues' views) and years of
others' learning (giving students themselves a voice they don't often
have in scholarship of this sort). The work she's done most recently, with
students in an integrative learning program that is not characterized as an
interdisciplinary program, shows her confirming the developmental nature
of integrative learning, as Abbott and Nantz also do. Her major contribution,
beyond grounding her theory in a rich array of empirical data, is the
identification of developmental stages through which students progress en route
to integrative learning—stages she relates to those that other researchers
of cognitive development have identified. Interestingly, she has discovered
that students in the program under study do not demonstrate the capacity
to integrate or synthesize that typifies the fourth or most advanced stage of
development. Like Abbott and Nantz's students, they have moved towards
such capacity, but not claimed it. By way of contrast she cites earlier SOITL
work by Bill Newell showing that students in a specifically interdisciplinary
program were able to demonstrate the capacity to integrate in a senior
capstone course.
In their article on “Interdisciplinary Studies and the Real World,”
Benjamin Brooks and Evan Widders offer a piece perfectly described by its
subtitle, “A Practical Rationale for and Guide to Post-Graduation Evaluation
and Assessment.” Its approach is pragmatic, focusing on their experience
collecting data not from students currently in the program under study (as
Abbott and Nantz and Leonard have done) but from students who have
graduated from the program, alumni whose distance from and perspective on
their undergrad experience make them as valuable a source of information
as they are often underutilized. Even assessment-phobes will agree that the
authors argue effectively for the usefulness of such assessment, not just
in satisfying ever-increasing demands for demonstration of programmatic
achievement but also in identifying areas where programs might benefit
from change. (And Brooks and Widders do explain how they have used the
research tool they have developed thus far to improve their program, as, for
example, in its inculcation of their students' integrative skills.) Certainly we
editors are persuaded that widespread adoption of their approach could save
an interdisciplinary program or two from the administrative axe, proving
strengths and improving weaknesses, generating data useful in testing
claims about the educational outcomes of interdisciplinary programs and
identifying factors that shape those outcomes. Such empirical testing of
interdisciplinary claims may well be the next big thing in interdisciplinary
studies (and in the Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning).
If so, this article may play a significant role in that effort.
In his article, “Interdisciplinary Studies and the Question of Being,”
James Welch IV continues his scholarly project of mining the discipline
of philosophy for insights into the nature and conduct of interdisciplinary
studies. Two previous articles in this journal focused on the role of
epistemology in interdisciplinarity, and a third on the role of intuition. Here,
as in “Interdisciplinarity and the History of Western Epistemology” in Volume
27, Welch provides us with a historical survey of a category of philosophic
thought, in this case ontology, especially ontological thought (Eastern and
Western) that has explored the relationship between consciousness and
reality. But this article offers much more than a compendium of philosophical
ideas and arguments for non-philosophers to peruse. His theorizing, like
that of others throughout this volume, has implications for our practice. He
points out that it is often differing ontological assumptions that underlie
conflicts in disciplinary insights, and argues that interdisciplinarians must
learn to identify those assumptions to enable the creation of common ground
on which to build the more comprehensive or integrative understanding that
characterizes fully interdisciplinary work. More controversially, Welch
argues for consciousness grounded in ontological pluralism as important if
not essential to interdisciplinary integration.
Ken Fuchsman is another former contributor to Issues who is here pursuing
a longtime project, the aforementioned longtime project of AIS itself, namely,
definitions of integrative and interdisciplinary work and their relationship to
one another. In his article, “Interdisciplines and Interdisciplinarity: Political
Psychology and Psychohistory Compared,” he further develops a subject he,
like Welch, first addressed in Volume 27: the fact that “attempts to integrate
disciplinary ideas and methods can result in full, partial, incomplete, and
multiple integrations.” Here, he focuses on two of the “institutionalized
hybrid fields” he (like Julie Klein) calls “interdisciplines,” arguing that
scholars in these fields too often fail to practice the full integration most
interdisciplinarians preach. In limiting themselves to certain approaches
out of the array of contending discourses within their respective parent
disciplines, they favor congenial outlooks and methods while underplaying
or ignoring other pertinent perspectives. As he puts it, “many scholars in
these two specialties function within a conceptual comfort zone, uninterested
in some relevant bodies of research.” They settle into a sort of halfway house
somewhere between the disciplines they supposedly integrate and truly
interdisciplinary study. They would do well to emulate the more venturesome
interdisciplinarians whom Darbellay celebrates in the opening article of this
volume, those “nomads” who have concepts and will travel, dealing with the
discomforts of the open road of inquiry until they arrive at a more integrated
(and interdisciplinary) destination than a halfway house can ever be.

As we acknowledged in our opening paragraph, the debate, on this and on
the many other matters interdisciplinarians deal with, goes on. But we think
you will agree that the articles in this volume show that interdisciplinarians
have moved well along towards a much more fully developed and finely
nuanced understanding of interdisciplinarity in the years since AIS was
founded. Further evidence of how far the interdisciplinary studies profession
has come will be provided in our next volume, already slated to include
articles by three prominent AIS scholars on the “State of the Field,” invited
in celebration of the 35th anniversary of our organization. We encourage
you to submit articles for that volume, the first volume of the journal to
be entitled Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies. Instructions for prospective
authors may be found inside the back cover of the print edition of this
volume and on our AIS website. Gretchen Schulz and Pauline Gagnon, the
editors of the 2013 volume, look forward to seeing what you have to say.

William H. Newell and Gretchen Schulz