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Senior IMJR Talk:

Interdisciplinary Writing

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Three years ago I walked into Dr. Lamb's office, as a sophomore and transfer student I was brand new to UConn and she was as well. I remember asking Dr. Lamb if she thought having an individualized major would help or hinder my chances of getting into grad school. She said she really couldn't be sure, but she thought having an individualized major in International Relations would demonstrate academic initiative.

I have spent the last three years jumping between the Economics and Political Science departments at UConn. Most recently, this past year, I have been involved in working on my Honor's Senior Thesis on the resource curse effect, a project that integrates scholarly literature from economics and political science. I am most interested in how literature from one discipline can inform another. For example, many economists have recently begun to employ political explanatory variables in their models for economic development. There seems to be a growing recognition that political corruption, institutional norms, and regime types have an immense influence over development trajectories. Simultaneously, political scientists are becoming more concerned with strengthening the robustness of their regression models, because they recognize their body of peers is expanding to include those from other disciplines, especially economics. In addition more and more interdisciplinary IR journals are accepting work from both political scientists and economists; the format for a scholarly article in economics and political science is converging, so that it might be difficult to tell at first which discipline the researcher is from.

This semester I had the opportunity to work with several IMJR and cross-departmental students through the Writing Center. Overall, I have found that cross-departmental students have writing needs that are somewhat unique from students with traditional majors. Interdisciplinary students do not have the security of a traditional, home academic department, and are constantly embedded in a process of seeking answers from multiple sources and disciplines, whether the student is first crafting their plan of study and statement of purpose, mid-way through their studies and working on papers for multiple departments, or engaged in their final capstone project. What I have taken from working with capstone students on their papers in particular is a realization of the richness of experience and abundant creativity these students possess. Many capstone papers utilize both popular and scholarly sources from multiple different perspectives, and students may adopt several different writing norms from various departments. One student I worked with, who had an individualized major in Restaurant Management, insisted that he was going to use the courses in a meal as titles for different sections in his paper, after I suggested that he employ titles and subtitles to improve the organization of the paper. For example, he titled the introduction section the 'Amuse Bouche' and the background and history section the 'Appetizer'.

The most unique tutoring session I experienced this semester was a joint tutoring session with the Economics graduate student writing tutor and an undergraduate with a triple major in Economics, Finance, and Political Science. In my first session with this student she raised a number of provocative questions, such as what are the differences between research in economics and political science, why were her advisors in the Economics department complaining that she writes too much like a political scientist, and how would a political scientist research eminent domain, the topic of her independent study, differently from that of an economist. After discussing the session with the Economics graduate student tutor, Nick, we decided that a joint tutoring session might be most helpful for this student, so that I could bring my experience with research in political science and he could provide his knowledge about economics and the Economics department at UConn. Rather than highlighting the differences between political science and economics, instead the joint session confirmed for me the similarities in expectations for research papers in economics and political science both style and format, such as the formal sections expected in research paper, including the Introduction, Literature Review, Model, Analysis, and Conclusion. We also agreed that some of her advisors' complaints might not be valid. Nick emphasized that there is definitely a place for more descriptive theoretical as well as qualitative work in economics.

We couldn't answer all of the student's questions completely or perfectly delineate the boundaries surrounding research and writing in political science and economics during that tutoring session, but I don't think that's the point. A short while ago I was a part of Scholar's Day and had the opportunity to hear the eloquent remarks of Dr. Hanson from Political Science concerning what it means to be a scholar. Reflecting on her comments I concur that being a scholar is about asking questions—personally I have found that sometimes you must ask the same questions over and over again, and progressively arrive at better solutions. Particularly, interdisciplinary scholars ask questions that bridge stringent disciplinary lines and desire to compare and integrate various disciplines in their writing.