Integrated Knowledge

DEAN’S COLUMN

When people ask me what I like most about being dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, I often answer: the intellectual variety. On any day, I may spend time talking with physicists, poets and political scientists. The dean must try to appreciate them all. While I know the limits of my own mind, I still enjoy stretching my understanding to fields that are new to me.

From the very beginning of my own academic experience, I have been intellectually restless. As an undergraduate, I studied German, English, Greek and Latin as well as linguistics. I chose to pursue my Ph.D. in comparative literature, attracted by the interrelationships of different literary and cultural traditions. That determination to look at the world from multiple perspectives is part of what attracted me to Penn and to SAS, which have a strong tradition of interdisciplinary research and teaching. It’s a tradition that will shape the future of the School in conjunction with a new drive to integrate knowledge across the University.

In her inaugural address last fall, President Amy Gutmann laid out the principles encompassing her vision, what she called the Penn Compact. Academia remains “too divided into disciplinary enclaves,” she insisted. “We must better integrate knowledge in order to comprehend our world.” The most challenging problems of our complex, interconnected world do not fall neatly into academic disciplines or even professions. Understanding and responding to the AIDS epidemic, for instance, requires the joint perspectives of medicine, finance, law, biology, psychology, history and more.

“The time is ripe,” President Gutmann declared, “for Penn to achieve a truly successful partnership between the arts and sciences, and the professions.”

In the School of Arts and Sciences, we have long understood that many of the most interesting questions are best answered by bridging the traditional disciplines. That collaboration extends to partnerships at every level with the professional schools at Penn, in research centers and academic programs.

The Penn Humanities Forum explores and celebrates links between the humanities and other areas of inquiry, particularly law and medicine. The forum’s annual theme and vibrant schedule of lectures, seminars and public events distinguish it from strictly academic “think tanks.” Each year, the forum offers a number of undergraduate research fellowships to promote humanistic thinking across disciplines and across Penn’s schools.

The Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict draws on faculty across Penn to understand the causes, dynamics and consequences of ethnic violence. The center disseminates that knowledge through research, training and advising activities around the globe.

The Penn Genomics Institute integrates biology, medicine, engineering and computer science to advance research projects on genomes and their protein expression. Genomics and the application of computer and information technologies to biology are among the most far-reaching developments in cutting-edge science. Our undergraduates can take part in this front-line confluence of disciplines through concentrations in computational biology in the math and biology majors.

These and other interdisciplinary, cross-school initiatives demonstrate that SAS is already going down the road onto which President Gutmann has now turned the University. In February, she accepted an anonymous gift of $10 million to endow innovative professorships whose holders will have joint appointments between Penn schools. We in the School of Arts and Sciences are eager to play a leading role in this pioneering approach to integrating knowledge across the University. We will be taking the lead in collaborating with Penn’s other schools in recruiting exceptional faculty who exemplify the principle that the future of knowledge will transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries.