

“When thoughts originating in different domains can engage together, the result is an almost limitless capacity for imagination.”

— British archaeologist Steven Mithen

Not all great minds think alike. In fact, the greatest breakthroughs often happen when there is a diversity of expertise, opinion and approach. At Boise State University, creative new collaborations are helping transform both how the university operates and what it accomplishes. In the classroom, the laboratory, the community and farther afield, an interdisciplinary approach is breaking down barriers and opening doors. Join us on the following pages as we explore some of the ways Boise State is bringing together unlike-minded individuals and programs, and what is being gained as a result.



Expanding Campus Boundaries

BY KATHLEEN CRAVEN

School pride and athletic rivalries are as much a part of campus life as cramming for exams. The “Big Game” between the Boise State Broncos and University of Idaho Vandals continues to highlight the undergraduate experience and add fuel to good-natured alumni bantering. Many a pint has been wagered and lost on the game’s outcome.

But off the field, Boise State is committed to the idea that collaboration, not rivalry, is the key to academic success. As President Bob Kustra noted last summer, “It is in the best interests of the state for its institutions of higher learning to approach each other in a cooperative spirit. Our students and

our citizens deserve no less.”

In that spirit of cooperation, several Boise State departments and academic centers are teaming up with colleagues across the state to offer innovative programs that enrich the university’s academic reputation.

One example is the IDEa Network of Biomedical Research Excellence. INBRE promotes collaboration among all universities and colleges in Idaho to enhance opportunities for Idaho’s faculty and students to perform biomedical research.

The program was funded in 2004 by a five-year \$16.1 million National Institutes of Health grant, the largest NIH research and educational grant in

“It is in the best interests of the state for its institutions of higher learning to approach each other in a cooperative spirit.”

the state’s history. The grant is aimed at enhancing opportunities for faculty and students at 10 colleges and universities throughout Idaho.

Every summer, dozens of undergraduate students from Idaho schools,



JOHN KELLY

INBRE fellow Alonzo Rivas is working with Boise State biology professor Juliette Tinker on research that could someday lead to the development of a vaccine for the plague. Below, the historical journal *Idaho Yesterdays* is a collaborative project between BSU and Idaho State.

including Boise State, are awarded fellowships to perform research guided by experienced scientists, attend seminar presentations, and present their findings in a professional setting. Many perform research at universities other than their home school, with professors they might not otherwise have met.

“The advantage is that on an individual basis, we often don’t have the infrastructure needed to do significant research,” says Henry Charlier, a Boise State chemistry professor who is conducting research to improve a common chemotherapy treatment that often leads to congestive heart

failure. “Sharing is critical in research. Pooling resources means you can do bigger things.”

The grant also encourages cooperation between rival universities. “The principal investigators are giving a lot of who they are to my success as a way to grow Idaho,” Charlier says. “It’s contagious. Now I want to help others as I have been helped.”

And that cooperative spirit isn’t

limited to the scientific disciplines. Business and criminal justice students in the Twin Falls area are able to earn four-year degrees through an agreement with the College of Southern Idaho that allows for use of their facility. That means dozens of area residents earn Boise State diplomas each year without ever setting foot on the Boise campus, allowing for greater flexibility in their careers and educational planning.

Similarly, the School of Social Work has just launched a new master of social work program in northern Idaho. Students with a bachelor’s degree can now continue on to earn a master’s from Boise State by taking courses at either Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston or at a University of Idaho facility in Coeur d’Alene.

“This is really exciting because Boise State is responding to a need that’s been there for many years,” says program coordinator Bill Whitaker. “It’s a real feather in the cap of Boise State to be able to do that and provide a quality program.”

By taking classes in the evening and on weekends, students can finish the course requirements in about 10 months. Before the program was offered, northern Idaho students had to travel to Boise, Walla Walla, Wash., or



farther, and often had to enroll in a traditional two-year program. There are currently 19 students enrolled at each site.

In addition to academic offerings and expanded research opportunities, Boise State is collaborating with sister institutions on projects that benefit the state and region as a whole. One such project is the historical journal, *Idaho Yesterdays*. A victim of state budget cuts in 2002, the journal was revived in 2004 thanks to Boise State's Center for Idaho History and Politics.

Published by the Idaho State Historical Society, *Idaho Yesterdays* is produced by the center in cooperation with Idaho State University. In this case, Boise State provides the design, photography, marketing, printing and Web services, including accompanying lesson plans for classroom use, while ISU provides editorial content.

In a truly interdisciplinary model, the journal's editorial board includes faculty from Boise State, Idaho, LCSC, Brigham Young University-Idaho and CSI. The result is an award-winning journal that plays a vital role in helping to preserve Idaho's past.

"Together we make the most of thin resources," says Todd Shallat, center director and a Boise State history professor. "With skilled editorial direction from ISU, rare artifacts and prints from the historical society, photography from BSU and our own creative flair for artistic presentation, the gestalt of our publication is grander than the sum of its parts."

By reaching beyond its campus borders in partnerships, Boise State can continue to provide a quality education that surpasses what it can offer alone. That's the true nature of interdisciplinary cooperation.

Consortium helps determine energy options for Idaho



COURTESY: HYDROGENNOW.ORG

Boise State researchers are leading the way in a new statewide consortium charged with determining Idaho's best energy options for the future.

The Energy Policy Institute is a collaborative effort between Boise State's Public Policy Center and the Center for Advanced Energy Studies at the Idaho National Laboratory (INL), as well as between the three major Idaho universities: Boise State, Idaho and Idaho State. These agencies are working together to conduct energy-related research, provide classroom instruction and technical training, and promote public dialogue on energy issues.

A long-term goal of the institute is to create a collaborative center where people can deliberate the pros and cons of energy policy, according to John Freemuth, interim associate director of energy policy for EPI and a Boise State professor of political science.

Freemuth foresees the center hosting public meetings and conferences and producing reports geared toward the general public. "We want to help Idaho and the country as a whole come up with thoughtful ideas," he says. "We also want to show how Boise State can be a leader in helping people puzzle through problems and develop new policies."

In addition to public policy, the center will focus on scientific research. Daryl Butt, a professor in Boise State's Department of Materials Science and Engineering, says the center will look at all forms of alternative energy, including hydrogen, wind, geothermal and water.

Boise State is already collaborating with Montana State and Columbia University on a number of energy related problems. One example is carbon dioxide sequestration, or the collection and safe disposal of carbon dioxide. Currently, most carbon dioxide is disposed of in the ocean. Butt and his team hope to find better, safer alternatives.

"I think we all have something to offer," he says, "and together we can create synergy. These are not problems any one university can address by itself. It requires all of us to work together."

The center, funded by a \$3 million Congressional earmark (Boise State's portion is about \$1 million), will eventually become self-sustaining through contracts and grants.

— Kathleen Craven



CARRIE QUINNEY

Adjunct professor Paul Thompson is teaching prison inmates construction skills at a Habitat for Humanity work site.

Service builds a sense of **community**

BY JULIE HAHN

How many hours did you spend volunteering last year? Boise State's Service-Learning students spent more than 23,000. And that was just spring semester.

You may not have heard of Service-Learning or the Volunteer Services Board, or be aware of faculty involvement in the community, but such service is essential to Boise State's role as a metropolitan research university of distinction. As President Bob Kustra has said, "A metropolitan university ... has a responsibility to foster a sense of citizenship and community both on and off campus."

Kara Brascia, director of the Service-Learning program, has helped make that happen. She helps faculty members incorporate service into classes, which means that students in a Shakespeare class may direct a play at a local elementary school, or history students may help refugees learn English while documenting their oral histories.

The results have been impressive. Most students — 73 percent — who take Service-Learning classes have not volunteered regularly before taking the class. At the end of the semester, 36 percent say that they will continue

volunteering regularly.

"When you think about that, you realize students want to be involved ... they just need a structured opportunity," Brascia says. "In addition, students learn better when they apply coursework to community experiences."

Sherri Ellis agrees. She's the volunteer coordinator at the Boise Samaritan Village and has seen the lives of residents and students transformed through service.

Ellis has watched students sit by the bedside of a resident who didn't want to die alone, giving the family much-needed breaks. She has looked

on as a “spiritually in-tune” student sang to a resident, giving comfort as the resident was dying. And she has seen a Boise State student and a resident plan the resident’s funeral together.

“Boise State students are the jewel in our crown,” Ellis says.

For Maria Rollins, being a Boise State volunteer is a chance to be part of the community. Rollins is president of the Volunteer Services Board, a student-run group that coordinates events such as Service Saturdays and the Homecoming kickoff “Into the Streets.”

“It’s self-fulfillment, but at the same time, as an immigrant I need to give back to the community that has given me so much.”

Rollins has donated many hours and has worked with zoo animals, served dinners and played with kids at the tiny “grocery store” in the Discovery Center.

This year, she spent her spring break in Houston as part of the Alternative Spring Break program. A group of Boise State students volunteered at the Dallas Zoo, the Ronald McDonald House, a food bank and more, helping people who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Rollins, who originally hails from the Philippines, says that her volunteer efforts are part of who she is. “It’s self-fulfillment, but at the same time, as an immigrant I need to give back to the community that has given me so much,” she says.

But Boise State’s service to the community goes beyond volunteerism. Art Department chair Richard Young

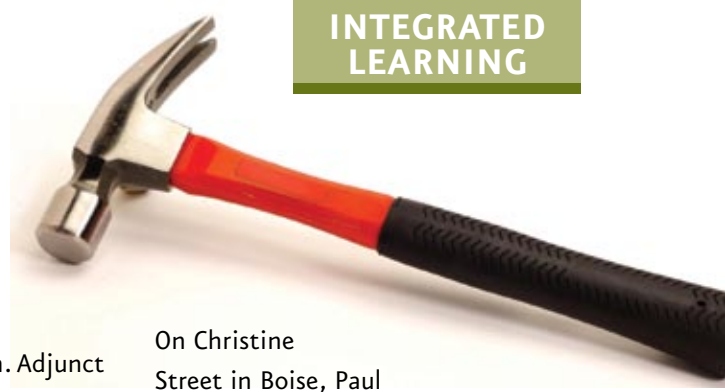
and music professor Marcellus Brown serve on the Boise City Arts Commission. Philosophy professor Tony Roark is on the roster of Boise’s Ethics Commission. Adjunct philosophy instructor George Knight has encouraged hundreds of people to get out of their cars and onto bikes during the annual Bicycle Congress. Bilingual Education Department chair Claudia Peralta-Nash helps mentor school teachers. And that’s just the beginning.

Boise State also has developed important partnerships. The Center for Health Policy and Elizabeth West, a professor in the Department of Special Education, work with Princeton Autism Technology Inc. to produce Web-based tools that help educators, health-care providers and parents of children with autism.

The technology they are developing captures Web footage of the children, which can then be shared with educators or health-care providers, allowing for easier diagnosis. Boise State students serve as research assistants, and some faculty serve as consultants on the project. Boise State researchers gain expertise in the area and work with the group on grants and research papers.

“It’s a perfect match for Boise State,” says Uwe Reischl, former director of the Center for Health Policy.

As the center works on that collaboration, another project across town is providing shelter for one family and hope for a group of young men who might not otherwise have much.



On Christine Street in Boise, Paul Thompson is supervising a group of men in matching dark green shirts who are working on a 1,250-square-foot house. The house is for Habitat for Humanity, and the young men are prison inmates.

Thompson is a construction instructor in the Larry G. Selland College of Applied Technology who works at the Center for Workforce Training. He teaches a construction class for the Department of Corrections and has been pleased with the results of the partnership between Boise State, the department and Habitat for Humanity.

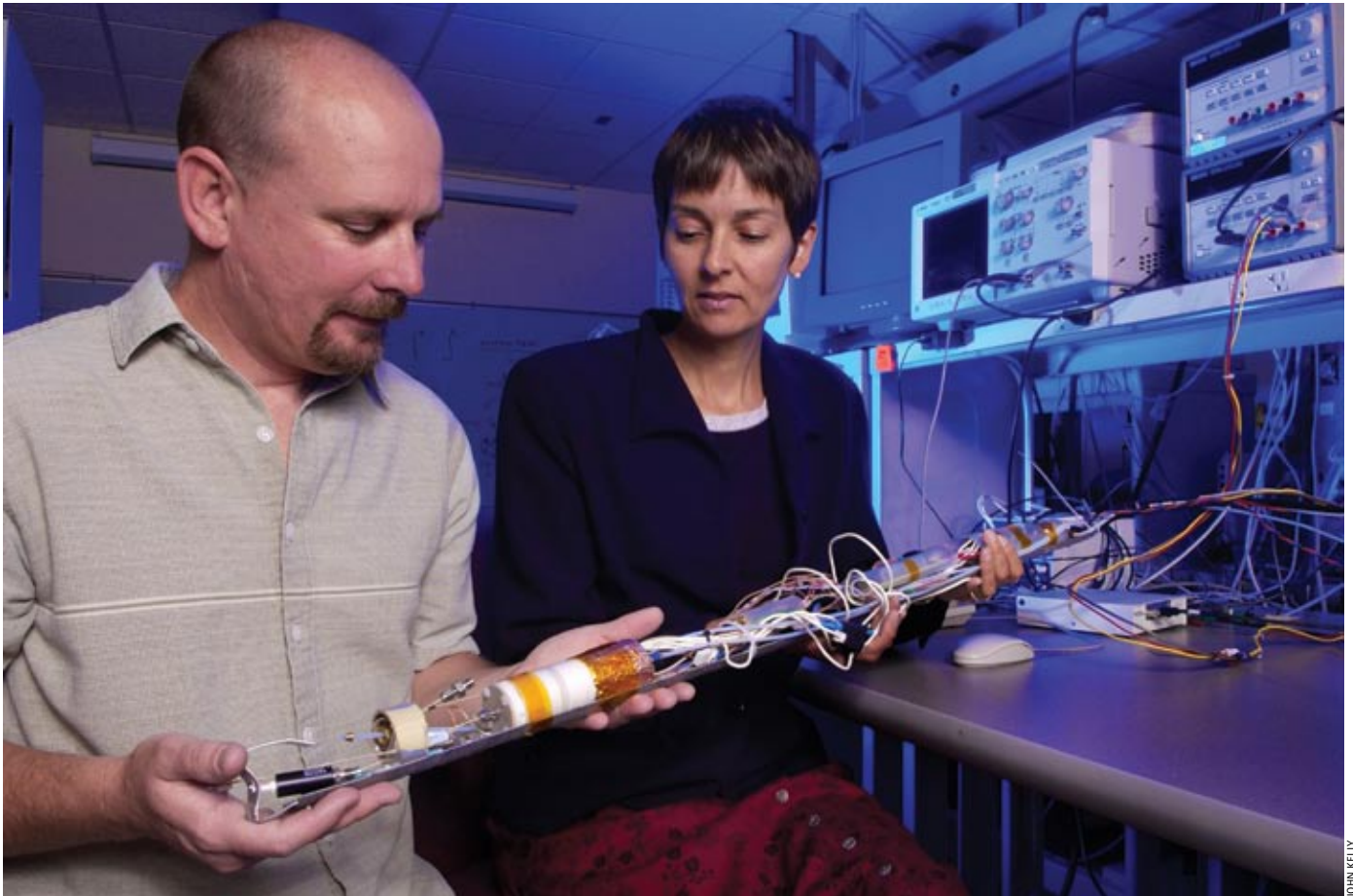
Although some of his students had never worked in construction before, the house is three months ahead of schedule. Thompson says that his class will build more houses for Habitat for Humanity in the future.

That’s fine with Brad Burchard, one of the inmates. “It’s cool to work with Mr. Thompson,” he says, smiling.

The inmates have done everything “from the concrete up,” Burchard says. “It feels good to give back to the community.”

The inmates get work experience that will serve them after they leave prison, and Habitat for Humanity gets a quality home. The project has been meaningful for Thompson as well, he says.

“I never in my wildest dreams thought I would be instructing, [let alone] instructing felons,” he says. “It’s an opportunity to give my skills and knowledge to someone else.”



JOHN KELLY

Civil engineering professor Molly Gribb and research engineer Robert Walters examine a chemical sensor designed and built at Boise State.

Collaboration plays key role in research success

BY JANELLE BROWN

Inside a brightly lit lab in the Engineering and Technology Building at Boise State, a 3-foot-long probe filled with wires and circuitry stretches across a countertop. Civil engineering professor Molly Gribb leans over the contraption, eyes it critically, and smiles.

This is her baby — a first-of-its-kind sensor developed over the past four years with the support of a multidisciplinary research team and more than \$3.7 million in federal research grants.

The sensor, an ion mobility spectrometer, measures volatile gases

trapped underground from chemical spills or other contamination. The IMS uses the same technology on a miniaturized scale that airports use to screen for explosives, chemical warfare agents and controlled substances. The instrument has the potential to be a powerful tool for identifying and addressing subsurface contamination issues, including those at the Idaho National Laboratory. But designing and building it has been a technical challenge on many fronts — and Gribb has had lots of help.

“It’s taken the expertise of a lot of very talented people in different fields

to get to this point,” says Gribb, director of the university’s new Center for Environmental Sensing. “Electrical and computer engineering, chemistry, computer science, materials science and engineering, mechanical and civil engineering — all these fields have been absolutely essential to building, and now field-testing, this instrument.”

The days of a single researcher in a single lab going it alone haven’t entirely disappeared from campus, say Gribb and other university scientists. But as Boise State ramps up its efforts to become a metropolitan research university of distinction, multidisciplinary research

is gaining new momentum, funding and visibility.

There are good reasons for the shift. To develop actual products, such as Gribb's IMS, scientists must be able to take individual technologies and figure out how they can work together to create something new. To tackle complex scientific questions, expertise in several areas is often critical. Advances in fields such as nanotechnology have blurred the boundaries between disciplines. In addition, federal agencies are increasingly requiring a multidisciplinary approach to research grant proposals.

"As baby boomers age, there is a

"Collaborations across campus will lead us toward creating a much more dynamic research environment for faculty and students."

growing emphasis on quality of life issues, and that has expanded opportunities in the biomedical field," says engineering professor Bill Knowlton. Knowlton collaborates with biology professor Julia Oxford and others on research that could lead to the development of artificial cartilage for aging knees and other joints. He brings his research on the nanoscale properties of circuitry to collaborative projects to develop biomolecular sensors capable of detecting diseases or chemical warfare agents.

Knowlton says his students are among the beneficiaries of collaborations with colleagues in physics, chemistry, biology, materials science, electrical engineering and other disciplines. "Our students gain a broad perspective of how to apply what they've learned," he says. "They understand connections between disciplines be-

cause they experience them in the lab firsthand."

Faculty also benefit from the chance to collaborate with colleagues from different disciplines. "There's a synergy that develops. What we accomplish together is certainly greater than the sum of the parts," says Oxford of the team effort behind her studies of the structure and function of collagen.

Step into labs across campus, or visit field stations in far-flung places, and the synergy Oxford describes becomes apparent. Knowledge isn't just acquired incrementally; it leaps

ahead as researchers on different parts of a project make breakthroughs that propel everyone forward.

The benefits can have ripple effects beyond any one research endeavor as labs and equipment are acquired that pave the way for even more ambitious projects.

The "Million Dollar Baby," a transmission electron microscope acquired with NSF funding, is just one example of how Boise State's research success is building vital infrastructure. The instrument will be used by researchers in more than a half-dozen science and engineering disciplines to tackle a broad range of funded projects, from studying magnetic materials to improving the reliability of memory chips and developing portable sensors.

"This award represents a truly interdisciplinary focus and a new avenue for scholarly work," says Janet Hampikian, associate dean of the College of Engineering who procured the NSF grant along with colleagues in a

number of science and engineering fields. "The instrument expands the scope of our research programs, and will help us successfully compete for future grants."

Multidisciplinary research programs also support expanding graduate programs, such as the new M.S. in hydrologic sciences that will enroll its first students this fall. A \$9 million statewide project funded by the NSF's Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research helped lay the groundwork for graduate studies by funding projects aimed at bolstering Idaho's ability to study critical water issues, says Jim McNamara, co-principal investigator along with Gribb on BSU's share of the grant.

As research and graduate programs continue to grow at Boise State, opportunities for collaborations will also flourish, says Jack Pelton, interim vice president for research and dean of the Graduate College.

"Collaborations across campus will lead us toward creating a much more dynamic research environment for faculty and students, with more funding and larger projects," Pelton says. "We'll be able to contribute to addressing complex research questions on a much larger scale."



A meeting of the minds

BY SHERRY SQUIRES

Engineering professor Steve Tennyson and marketing and finance professor Gary McCain work in different buildings and different disciplines. But three years ago the two Boise State teachers forged a bond.

They realized that together they possessed the knowledge and experiences to help businesses address complicated, multi-tiered issues with devel-

oped in a world that would otherwise never have crossed my path as a marketing professor," McCain says.

On a campus that is home to experts in a variety of fields, many turn to their colleagues to tackle complex research or to share a different perspective with students. Each semester new partnerships are sealed, new research undertaken and new examples

complements what we do on the engineering and design side."

In many cases, students are the ultimate benefactors when faculty find ways to combine their knowledge and experiences.

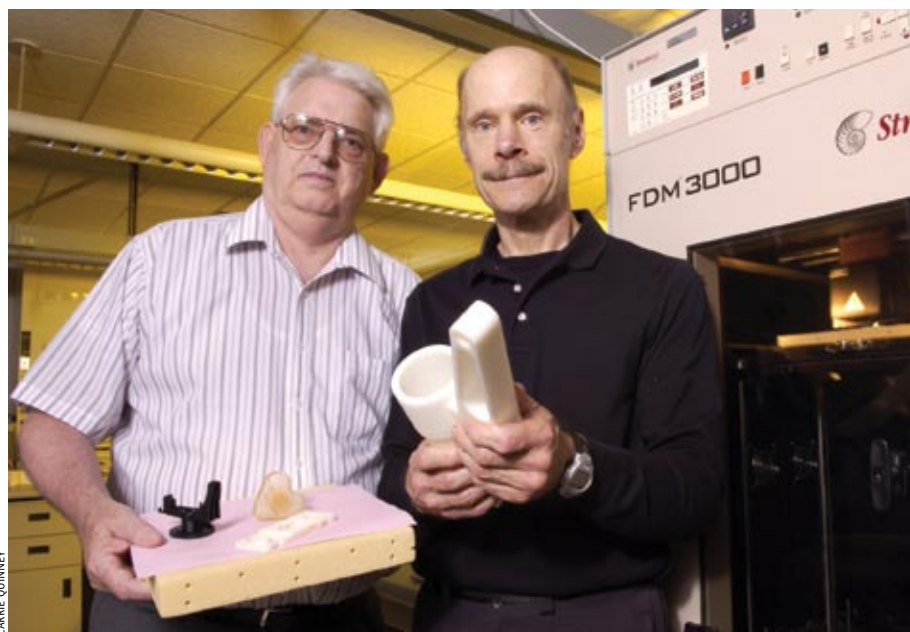
Elisa Barney Smith, engineering, and Rickie Miller, education, met while jointly serving on a university committee. They subsequently developed "Engineering for Educators," a unique course that puts engineering students and education students in the same classroom.

The goal is to better equip education majors to teach K-12 math and science. But Barney Smith has found that the class also breaks down stereotypes the students may hold about one another.

"Not just the education and engineering students are learning, but generations of kindergarten through 12th-grade students will benefit from having a teacher who sees how math and science can be applied," she says. "They may, in turn, encourage more of their young students to consider engineering as a career."

This multidisciplinary approach is also essential for entities such as the Family Studies Initiative. Because complex issues must be tackled from a multitude of angles, director Linda Anooshian says the initiative has drawn together faculty from many departments who conduct research related to families, and aims to provide the framework for interdisciplinary research.

"There's been some success, but the promise of future success is even



CARRIE QUINNEY

The work of professors Gary McCain (left) and Steve Tennyson in Boise State's New Product Development Lab has helped Idaho manufacturing companies.

oping, manufacturing and marketing their products. With help from other colleagues, they have successfully used Boise State's rapid prototyping machinery to improve the new product development process for Idaho's rural companies, provided training on state-of-the-art prototyping technology, and were even involved in using the machine to develop spine models for pre-surgery analysis.

"I had the opportunity to be in-

added to the growing list of multi-disciplinary projects under way at Boise State.

For Tennyson and McCain, the joint work also helped foster a better understanding of one another's work.

"As far as scholarship, it certainly gave me an appreciation for the role marketing plays in developing new products," Tennyson says. "There is a science and an art to what those people do, too, and the many ways it

greater," she says. "We are involved in research and in articulating the relevance of research to those who work out in the field."

Much like the Family Studies Initiative, the Center for the Study of Aging could not address all of the issues affecting Idaho's elderly population without the work of both faculty in the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs and the College of Health Sciences.

Director Annette Totten says there are a multitude of social and health-related issues that must be considered. For example, the area of elder abuse must be addressed by faculty in criminal justice, health sciences and social sciences. The center also hopes to begin multidisciplinary work on chronic illnesses.

"The biggest challenge is just getting people connected and talking about these issues," Totten says. She is confident the outcome will be worth the effort, as federal granting agencies tend to favor multi-disciplinary approaches.

For example, the College of Education recently received a \$494,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to build on the groundwork Barney Smith and Miller laid that encourages students majoring in science, technology, engineering and mathematics to become K-12 teachers in those areas.

"It's one of the things I love about Boise State," Barney Smith says. "We have a lot of interdisciplinary projects and I believe it makes us more efficient and more productive with our limited resources. When we need something slightly out of our reach, we can turn to one another rather than hiring someone outside to provide it for us."

Blame it on the bossa nova

Personal passions lead to interdisciplinary programs

BY BOB EVANCHO

Did you know you can create and earn a master's degree at Boise State in "Eastern traditions and the theatre," "moss restoration ecology," and "women and minorities in the American frontier"? Or a bachelor's degree in "music thanatology," a program that delves into the use of music to help the terminally ill?

Those are just a sampling of the approximately 40 undergraduate and more than 100 graduate degree programs that have been completed or are currently active in the university's interdisciplinary studies (IDS) program.

Now entering its 19th year, the program allows students to mix and match courses of study — contingent upon meeting university standards and committee approval — to create unique and specialized programs, such as jazz guitarist Elisabeth Blin's "Brazilian music and social consciousness" master's program.

Blin, a native of France who now resides in Boise, says she had a reawakening of her social responsibility while she was working on her bachelor's degree in music performance, which she earned from Boise State last year. "My [bachelor's] program and the professors who taught me dramatically affected my evolution as a musician," she says. "They reminded me that you can not only play music, but that you can use it as a contribution to show what is wrong in society. There has always been a strong link between music and political activism."

Those influences combined with the worldwide volatility in the wake of terrorist attacks and political strife, along with her years as a composer and jazz and classical musician, rekindled Blin's passion to "do more than just make music."

Her interdisciplinary master's program is a combination of graduate-



JOHN KELLY

Cheatum's interdisciplinary master's program in biomechanical engineering spun off from her four-year degree at Boise State.

level music, history and anthropology courses that studies the influences of the bossa nova and related Brazilian music as expressions of social discord during the cultural revolution know as Tropicália, which first manifested itself in the 1960s in response to the authoritarian government and political unrest that plagued that country for years.

"It's been fascinating so far," she says. "It has given me hope and strength to show how music can make a difference politically and socially."

Similar to Blin's experience, Nichole Cheatum's interdisciplinary "biomechanical engineering" master's program spun off from the four-year degree in mechanical engineering she earned from Boise State in 2004. Under the guidance of mechanical engineering professor Michelle Sabick and others, Cheatum became interested in limb prosthetics and molded her master's program by integrating courses and research in mechanical engineering, materials science and engineering, and kinesiology. And like Blin, she gravitated to the IDS program in large part because of the instructors she encountered as an undergraduate.

"I love the people here, and this is a great place to expand your area of interest," says Cheatum, a native of Twin Falls who is on schedule to receive her master's degree in December. "Thanks to my committee members [engineering professors Sabick and John Gardner and kinesiology prof Ron Pfeiffer] I was able to create a program that gives me exactly what I'm looking for at the graduate level. When you get the right people involved in your program, the flexibility of the [interdisciplinary studies] program is amazing."

Daryl Jones, Boise State's IDS program director and the university's former provost, agrees. "The IDS program permits students to develop innovative programs in these areas of study even as the disciplines evolve and coalesce," he says. "So, too, the IDS program provides faculty an opportunity to engage their colleagues in other disciplines and to develop interdisciplinary teaching and research programs."

Moreover, Jones says, the interdisciplinary studies program is ideally suited to help fulfill Boise State's mission as a metropolitan research university "since the flexibility of the program enables students to design unique programs that respond immediately to rapid changes in our metropolitan environment, as well as in the world at large, where new directions in research often develop in the synapse between evolving disciplines. Some of the most exciting research these days is interdisciplinary in nature."

Cheatum and Blin are two examples of the right student being in the right interdisciplinary studies program for the right reason — and the profound educational experience that can result. "Often the most exciting developments in knowledge occur at the flashpoints where two or more fields meet," Jones says. "The interdisciplinary studies program allows students to see from a much broader perspective and use insights gathered from different disciplines. Many of them know they are being given a new way of looking at the world."

A Tale

After a 13-year hiatus, the author discovers the true meaning of interdisciplinary academics

BY BOB EVANCHO

As the product of both baccalaureate and graduate interdisciplinary studies programs, I know a thing or two about these academic hybrids.

I know at one time they were denounced in some university circles as unstructured, watered-down versions of bona fide majors, bereft of meaningful scholarship and job-market potential. I also know years ago they were looked upon disdainfully by some purists, viewed as a hodgepodge of classes thrown together by directionless students who lacked a sense of intellectual purpose and personal focus.

I know because some 30 years ago I was one of those aimless undergraduates.

My venture into "integrative learning" began my junior year at Grand Valley State College in my native Michigan. That was the year I transferred from GVSC's traditional College of Arts and Sciences to the school's ultraprogressive William James College, which espoused an interdisciplinary approach to learning and a commitment to "responding to the personal needs and desires of its students."

The reason for my internal transfer was valid enough: I developed a serious interest in writing and

of Two Programs

wanted to add a journalism major to my sociology major; at the time the arts and media curriculum at WJC was the closest thing Grand Valley had to a journalism program.

Although I was chided by some friends and classmates for switching to Grand Valley's "hippie" college, it was a wise move in the long run. Because my career goals were uncertain at the time, WJC's arts and media courses and independent studies — with their cross-disciplinary emphasis and flexibility—gave me broad-based exposure to the various aspects of print and broadcast journalism and kept me on track to graduate, which I did in 1975.

My time at William James College was worthwhile; the interdisciplinary programs and initiatives allowed me to shape my own learning experience and get a feel for writing and reporting in both the classroom and the real world. But I must admit, there was a certain latitude within the school that lacked the sense of urgency I usually associated with the pursuit of a degree. Moreover, I found WJC's credit/no credit grading system to be less grueling and nerve-racking than what I was used to. I wouldn't say William James College fostered a *laissez-faire* approach to learning, but it wasn't exactly *The Paper Chase*, either.

Fast-forward 13 years. I'm a seasoned journalist, a writer for Boise State's news bureau and among the first group of students to seek admission into the university's new interdisciplinary studies (IDS) program (page 27). I wonder if my re-entry into the realm of integrative learning will



“We work to make sure that our interdisciplinary programs are genuinely rigorous and genuinely interdisciplinary in nature.”

be anything like my first go-round. I quickly discover the answer is no.

Instituted in 1988, BSU's interdisciplinary bachelor's and master's programs are designed to emphasize “continued intellectual and cultural development in a constantly changing society” for students “whose career goals do not match fully with a single identifiable academic unit or department.”

Hey, that's me, I thought when Boise State first announced it would

start its IDS program. My proposed “social affairs writing” master's program — a combination of graduate-level English, history and sociology classes — would help me hone my writing and research skills as a journalist and broaden my intellectual perspective. It all made perfect sense.

I figured I was good to go. But my entry into the program was anything but automatic.

“One of the reasons we started the interdisciplinary studies program was to maximize the productivity of our programs and make efficient use of what we did offer back then,” says IDS director Daryl Jones, who initiated the program when he was Boise State's arts and sciences dean. “But we do not allow these programs to become diluted substitutes for other degree programs. We are vigilant in ensuring that

we have the faculty expertise and the rigorous coursework to justify the programs. We have requirements built into the program to protect those things from happening. We work to make sure that our interdisciplinary programs are genuinely rigorous and genuinely interdisciplinary in nature.”

I can vouch for that. Our inaugural group of IDS candidates — and the more than 100 graduate students and approximately 40 undergrads who have followed us since '88

— were required to jump through numerous hoops before we ever set foot in a classroom.

First, we not only had to assemble our respective programs in their entirety, but we also had to justify how each and every class merged with all the others to form a single body of academic work. Second, we had to form an advisory committee that included a faculty member from each discipline in our respective programs. Third, we had to present our specialized/individualized programs to a universitywide Interdisciplinary Studies Committee for approval.

Although both groups approved my coursework and Boise State's IDS program started that fall, I still had some colleagues who looked askance at the whole interdisciplinary studies thing — at least initially. One skeptic was political science professor John Freemuth.

“The one danger I saw, at least at the beginning, was attempts by

students who couldn't get into a regular academic master's program and would cobble together some kind of program to try to get into graduate school that way,” Freemuth says. “There was a concern that these would be some kind of amorphous, sloppy programs without the academic rigor. I'm all for diverse intellectual inquiry, but I also think that interdisciplinary programs should be for students with specific and unique objectives. We need to be good gatekeepers to make sure such programs don't compromise Boise State's academic integrity; I think Daryl has done a good job in

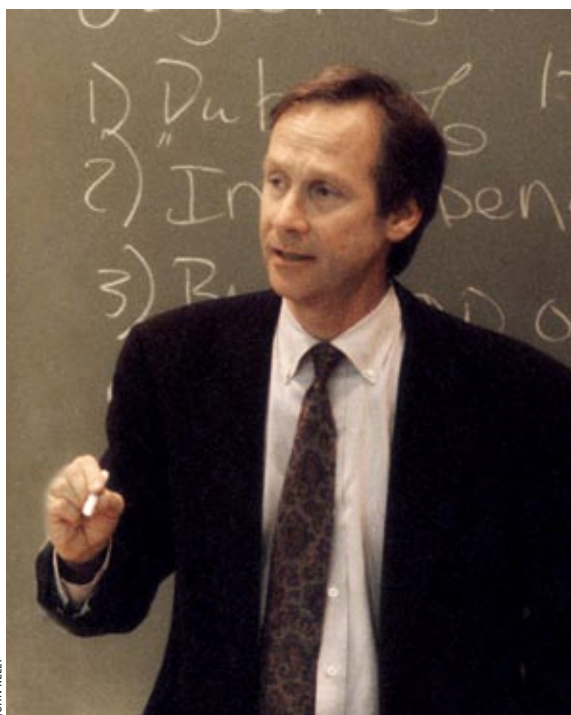
that regard. But we need to remain watchful.”

Based on my graduate experience at Boise State, I've got two words for my friend Dr. Freemuth: Don't worry ... at least about me. Given the opportunity to design my own course of study, I made discoveries and connections that may not have been possible in the narrow confines of a single-subject program. The flexibility inherent in Boise State's interdisciplinary studies program furnished me with a broader, more encompassing perspective that was invigorating, enriching and relevant — and an understanding of the true meaning of interdisciplinary academics.

FOCUS editor Bob Evancho earned his MA in social affairs writing through Boise State's interdisciplinary studies program in 1993.

“I'm all for diverse intellectual inquiry, but I also think that interdisciplinary programs should be for students with specific and unique objectives.”

— John Freemuth



JOHN KELLY

Freemuth was among those who initially looked askance at some interdisciplinary studies programs.