Recognizing that interdisciplinary activity among scholars can stimulate new and creative ways of thinking and encourage the growth of disciplinary fields, universities are increasingly investing in ongoing structures that foster collaboration across traditional departmental boundary lines.

This past year, UMass Amherst gave cross-disciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences a tremendous vote of confidence when it promoted the Interdisciplinary Seminar in the Humanities and Fine Arts (ISHA) to the status of full-fledged institute.

**An Institute is Born**
The recognition meant an increase in funding for the 11-year-old ISHA, now known as the Interdisciplinary Studies Institute (ISI). Committed, ongoing support from the campus has enabled the ISI to make longer-range plans for seminars, class visits, co-sponsorships, book publications, and residencies for visiting scholars such as renowned anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff. This year marked the publication of the first book based on one of the institute’s collaborative seminars, *Negotiating Culture: Heritage, Ownership, and Intellectual Property*, published by the University of Massachusetts Press.

To designate an institute is “a statement of commitment from an institution,” according to Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement Mike Malone. The decision to promote ISHA to ISI benefits not only the institute but the whole university. “An institute is an important ingredient in our research portfolio,” says Malone. “In the sciences, interdisciplinary work is often forced by funding agencies, but that is much rarer in the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences.”

As an institute, the ISI will now regularly incorporate the social sciences as well as the humanities, combining various approaches from the qualitative and critical to the quantitative, according to Provost James Staros.

**Themes Spur Excitement**
The ISI is structured around yearlong seminars on themes as diverse as sound and sight, reproduction, other worlds, and public art, and draws faculty participants from diverse fields: communication, education, gender studies, history, Afro-American studies, anthropology, public policy, art, and English, to name just a few. The 2013-14 seminar topic is “Emancipation,” to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Shona Macdonald, associate professor of art, architecture, and art history and one of this year’s faculty fellows, is enthused about exploring the ideas of emancipation and autonomy, “especially in light of the recent NSA blowups and what this means for everyday Americans’ freedom. The conversations and presentations in the ISI seminar are deeply thought-provoking.”

Themes for each year’s seminar are suggested by faculty in the ISI community and chosen by the ISI board. Faculty fellows who participate receive a research stipend for the year. Each presents a talk at the institute’s biweekly luncheon.

“[The ISI is a] nexus for creativity,” says ISI Director Stephen Clingman, a professor of English who specializes in postcolonial and transnational fiction as well as South African literature. “The institute provides a creative environment for cross-disciplinary work.”

**Interdisciplinary Adventures**
Banu Subramaniam, associate professor in women, gender, and sexuality studies, has participated in four ISHA seminars and so benefited from the experience that she is now on the ISI board. “I was trained as a biologist but teach in women’s studies, so I think interdisciplinarily,” says Subramaniam. “The seminars all have interesting themes and are broad enough that people around campus can see the connections in what they do. Your discipline shapes how you see the world and what kind of questions you ask. Sometimes someone in a seminar says something that opens your mind to see your own project in a whole new way.” She cites her participation in the “Migrations” seminar as an example: while Subramaniam studies how DNA reflects patterns of human migration, her fellow participant,
The institute provides a creative environment for cross-disciplinary work.

—STEPHEN CLINGMAN, ISI DIRECTOR, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

linguist John Kingston, revealed how the spread of language tells a slightly different story. "We use different variables, histories, and even methods of questioning," says Subramaniam. "It was such a rich conversation that led to the larger question of how we know anything."

Professor of History David Glassberg, another repeat faculty fellow, finds the seminars intellectually refreshing. A specialist in place memory and climate change, Glassberg attests that the seminars are good for jostling knowledge that faculty members can start to take for granted. "The exchanges can be what I would call 'fruitfully awkward,' when you realize that certain terms, like 'complexity' or 'elegance,' can have different meanings in different disciplines," Glassberg laughs. "Part of the fun is seeing if the ways we use them are totally unrelated or are fundamentally connected at a deep level."

Jon Machta, a professor of physics, saw the potential in the "Transformations" seminar: "My field is statistical physics, and I've given a lot of thought to how does one define complexity and how transformations lead to greater complexity. I appreciated the unique opportunity to present ideas from my own field to an audience with very different intellectual backgrounds. Preparing my talk stimulated me to think deeply about the core ideas in my field." Describing himself as the "furthest removed from the center mass" of the other participants' work, Machta had to become more aware of how to convey his ideas to a non-technical audience not necessarily versed in formulae. That experience, Machta says, helped him become more aware of how he presented his findings in general, "even to technical people." Stimulated and broadened by his ISHA experience, he is currently collaborating on an interdisciplinary project with an ecologist at University of California Davis.

Malone says the measure of the ISI's success will be how it meets its own goals over a five-year period. He acknowledges that the goals will evolve as the institute itself evolves and thrives. Clingman's infectious optimism and his resolve to keep the seminars topical, relevant, and responsive to current events seem to guarantee a bright future for the ISI.

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