



Stanford eCorner

Encouraging Cross-Disciplinary Interaction

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2189/Encouraging-Cross-Disciplinary-Interaction>

How is Stanford University facilitating long-lasting relationships between departments? President of the University John Hennessy encourages students to make connections, but he also highlights other more concrete efforts to align research in adjacent disciplines. Stanford also provides some seed capital for aspiring ventures with promise.



Transcript

Audience: I was wondering what efforts Stanford's taking to create cross department synergies? So you mentioned that the importance of this in your talk and one thing that I've observed is that there may be certain parts of the university that are more segregated from other parts. And I'm curious, beyond EWeek and things of this nature, if we wanted to create long lasting relationships in order to truly innovate, what are we doing to facilitate that? John Hennessy: Yeah, and I think we are trying to facilitate it. I kind of think of it as in the end what we want to do is get people to work together. The first thing to observe about any university is that there are a lot more students than there are faculty. And they are perhaps a little more adventurous about crossing over what to a faculty member might resemble an impassable desert to get to collaborate with somebody else. So of course, in the end while we may try to bring faculty together, what we're really trying to do is get the students to work together. And we're trying to do that for two reasons. One is not only because that can result in some new innovation and new discovery. But also because we believe that the way in which students will need to be educated for the future is to combine both depth with some breadth. Some ability to talk to people in adjacent disciplines and fields because that's what they'll be doing over their careers as they move along.

So I've always thought about it as how do we break through that energy barrier and I think we break through it with various kinds of joint degree programs, joint teaching opportunities. So the course I mentioned, Entrepreneurial Design for Extreme Affordability is taught by a business school faculty member with help from engineering school as well. And they participate. But we also need joint research programs as well. And one of the things we've done is create the equivalent of a seed venture fund for research. So that we can get faculty who've never collaborated before over the energy barrier by giving them a small amount money to get the research started. And it's just like a seed capital, just like an angel investment. You're betting that if you can get the research going and you've got very capable people, that there's some probability of success. And that will build a more lasting opportunity. And then when that group has some progress, then they go out for their next round of funding to the NIH, to the NSF, to some other funding agency and they get a lot more money than we could have funded them and the research takes the next step.

And I think that's one way in which we've been able to jumpstart these collaborations. But we need to keep thinking about new ways to do it.