

# Facilitating Collaboration and Creating Multidisciplinary Research Opportunities

*By Isis Chong, California State University, Long Beach*

This article summarizes comments and advice from the “Enabling Interdisciplinary Research” panel at the 2014 Annual Meeting Student Career and Professional Development Day on October 27. This panel was chaired by Baron Summers (Capella University) and featured panelists Stephen Fiore (University of Central Florida), Kelly Hale (Design Interactive), Joseph Keebler (Wichita State University), Dan Nathan-Roberts (San Jose State University), and Shawn Weil (Aptima).

## Why Interdisciplinarity?

The panelists remarked that to solve problems and answer questions they encounter, researchers must reach beyond their own disciplines to use the varying lenses that are provided in areas of research with which they may not be familiar. Given the interdisciplinary nature of human factors/ergonomics, it is important to understand the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and how to successfully conduct this kind of research.

## How To Be Successful in Interdisciplinary Research

Individuals must first understand their own abilities and interests. The panelists posed the following key questions to ask oneself:

- What do I know (or not know) about this field?
- What can I offer or bring to this team?
- What do I want to learn through collaborating with others?

By evaluating what one’s role is going to be in a research team, one can better determine if interdisciplinarity is a good fit. Following this introspective process, students should attend relevant talks or events, seek out novel work, and network to expand their knowledge and opportunities. A few of the panelists noted that the most interesting opportunities arose when they stepped out of their comfort zones and stepped into fields unfamiliar to them.

## Factors to Consider

Although there are many benefits to conducting interdisciplinary research, panelists cautioned that one must keep in mind that not all situations may be suited for this kind of collaboration—or, as Shawn Weil called it, “the dark side of interdisciplinarity.” First, if there is a quickly approaching deadline, there may not be enough time for collaborators from different disciplines to translate their work and present it to others. With interdisciplinary research, all involved parties must be as informed as possible, but this requires time that may not be available. Second, disciplinary biases may lead to obstacles that prevent fruitful collaboration among participants. Third, one must also consider the possibly differing institutional incentives of other participants. Finally, one must consider each individual’s motivation and goals beyond the incentives he or she may receive.

In conclusion, the panel provided many insights on interdisciplinary research and considerations for collaborations. When such opportunities arise, students are highly encouraged to take them.

*Isis Chong is a second-year master’s student in human factors psychology at California State University, Long Beach.*