

Daniel Callahan

Adventures in an Interdisciplinary Career

It will be a very personal essay. I was an interdisciplinary major in college, then went on for a Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard. I soon became convinced that I did not want to become an academic philosopher. I found the whole discipline much too narrow and theoretical, too disciplinary. I then spent some time as a journalist, eventually becoming interested in bioethics and health policy. I founded in 1969, with a psychiatrist colleague, The Hastings Center, the first such research center in the world. It was deliberately and systematically interdisciplinary, with participants from medicine, biology, law, the social sciences, philosophy, political science, and theology. It also became clear to us along the way that it is much easier to do interdisciplinary work in a free-standing research center than in a university, precisely because we were topic- rather than discipline-oriented in our work. I would like to describe that process. In my own research and writing career I have been interdisciplinary. I have never written an article for a philosophy journal, but I have been published in social science journals, law reviews, health policy journals, theology journals, medical and biological journals.

I want, in short, to write about my experience, both as a scholar/writer and as someone who started and managed for 27 years an interdisciplinary center. And I want along the way to talk about the problems not only of my work but that of my colleagues. I want also to take a look at the field of health policy studies. I recently spent 5 years teaching the ethics track that is part of the Harvard Ph.D. program in health policy and came out of that with many thoughts about the academic field of health policy. I have also been concerned over the years in how best to have work in health policy make a difference in the politics of health policy. A personal anecdote will suggest why. Once in Washington I paid a visit to the Agency for Health Care, Quality and Research, a government agency that sponsors health policy research. I thought they were doing some interesting and useful work. I then went from there to visit the staff director of the Senate sub-committee on elder health care. I told him how impressed I had been with the agency I had just visited, asking him what use they made of such research. His answer: "we don't read that academic crap."