Ironies of Interdisciplinarity: exploring the practice and structure of collaboration in a scientific organization

Abstract: Interdisciplinary collaboration continues to be lauded by scholars, practitioners, and funding agencies as a necessary condition for fostering innovation in the contemporary organizational environment. Yet, interventions intended to foster cross-disciplinary work are frequently met with resistance and failure. One explanation for these challenges may be that we do not yet fully understand the nature of work involved in producing and sustaining interdisciplinarity. In this talk, I will draw on interview and social network data from a multidisciplinary scientific organization to explore the work practices involved in building cross-disciplinary collaborations and the challenges workers face as they seek to do so. Both sources of data reveal that although many practitioners have the skills and connections necessary for developing interdisciplinary relationships, a series of social, organizational, and structural features discourage them from realizing those relationships’ potential. Taken together, the data begin to illustrate why many of the “standard” techniques that organizations use to encourage cross-disciplinary relationships produce the ironic consequence of inhibiting such relations. Implications for theory and policy will be discussed.