



**MAKING INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:
ITAA MEMBERS SHARE COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES THAT MAKE A
DIFFERENCE**

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This session was sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Action Committee of ITAA in an effort to feature members who are success-ful interdisciplinary collaborators. Because many universities are requiring interdisci-plinary projects among faculty, it is essential that clothing and textile faculty bridge subject matter both within the discipline as well as with disciplines outside of clothing and textiles.

ITAA members attending the session heard about a broad range of successful inter-disciplinary collaborations. Hearing about these experiences hopefully de-mystified the process and encouraged members to pursue such collaborations on their own. Panelists represented a variety of collaborations. Panel members included Janet Hethorn, Michael Solomon, Maureen Grasso, and John Jacob. Questions panelists addressed included the following: What are the benefits of interdisci-plinary collaboration in teaching, research, or outreach? What are the challenges? How do interdisciplinary projects begin? How do such projects evolve? What experiences do panel members have within their own universities regarding interdisciplinary collaborations? Is there support for interdisciplinary collabора-tions at panel members' universities? What are some of the common roadblocks to interdisci-plinary collaboration that novices might antici-pate and how are they overcome? What are the tangible outcomes of interdisciplinary collaboration?

Janet Hethorn, University of Delaware, discussed her work on gang dress which involved police officers, teachers, youth, community leaders, and academics from other disciplines. Janet's work with gang dress and violence has resulted in an online web page. When engaged in interdisciplinary projects, Janet stressed the need to rid oneself of nega-tive thinking which will limit opportunities and ultimate success. She also suggested that one must identify one's passion when identifying projects because that's what provides motiva-tion when projects become challenging. Janet gave personal examples of roadblocks, such as academics in other disciplines who were ini-tially uninterested in collaboration and death threats to herself and her research assistants for identifying gang dress. Janet found working with others in the community rewarding but found from her experience that one must get past the roadblocks of playing outside the "safe" disciplinary zone.

Michael Solomon, Auburn University, discussed his many interdisciplinary experi-ences beginning with his background in Mar-keting and Business. Building bridges was the theme of Michael's comments about the bene-fits and challenges of interdisciplinary collabо-ration. His transition among three disciplines has led him to believe the interdisciplinary foundations of consumer research. Michael was instrumental in preparing a conference for retailers, manufacturers, advertisers, and social scientists in the early 1980s on the psychology of fashion.



Since then he has been involved in the National Textile Center on a "Lifestyles" project that tracks apparel/textile preferences among fashion-forward female consumers. The project is online and is industry-connected. Michael also discussed a future project ("Cool Online") that tracks what is considered "cool" among students at different universities.

Maureen Grasso, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, talked about her interdisciplinary projects with Mechanical Engineering, Business Administration, and Economics. Complex problems, according to Maureen, require more than one discipline to solve. Benefits of such collaboration, in her experience, include exposure to other ways of thinking and approaches to problems, an opportunity to learn a new language, and an opportunity to expand your realm of colleagues. Challenges include creating the time and having a commitment to the process, being an optimist, and learning new languages, conceptual models, and theories. Suggested ways to begin include sending risky e-mails, talking to people, and thinking about what disciplines would make a difference in solving the problem. Lastly, since many universities are using the model of "research centers," this creates a wonderful opportunity to connect with others on interdisciplinary projects.

John Jacob, Washington State University, discussed his doctoral dissertation research experience at Virginia Tech. His topic was "The Haus of Frau: Radical Drag Queens Disrupting the Visual Fiction of Visual Appearances." John believed that an interdisciplinary approach was essential to devise a theoretical framework that was both affirming and sensitive to the marginalized population he studied. His doctoral committee members were specialists in Textiles and Apparel, Women's Studies, Performance Theory, Human Development, Qualitative Research, Literary Criticism, Contemporary Continental Theory and Philosophy, Queer Theory, and Social Science. Finding and keeping committee members who felt qualified and who were agreeable to the "controversial" subject matter was a challenge. Passing the Human Subjects review was another challenge, given misconceptions and cultural blind spots of board members. As benefits of the process and tangible outcomes, John sees many. Since his final committee shared enthusiasm for the theory used and the subject matter, he looks forward to lasting professional connections with committee members. He sees greater publishing opportunities across disciplines and improved learning opportunities from seeing phenomena from various intellectual perspectives. Also, John sees opportunities for Textiles and Apparel scholars to strut their intellectual stuff and gain exposure across the university.

In summary, the panel provided excellent examples of interdisciplinary collaborations among diverse subject specializations within ITAA. The panelists highlighted connections within and outside the textile and apparel knowledge base to encourage collaborative thinking and interdisciplinary action.