

Multidisciplinary Learning at the University: An Interview with Dr. Harry R. Lewis

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In the fall of 1964, Harry R. Lewis first stepped foot on the campus of Harvard College as an undergraduate student. 10 years later, in 1974, he joined the Harvard faculty. Now in 2024, 60 years after his first arrival, Lewis is beginning his 51st year on faculty at Harvard University. Over these years as a student, professor, and Dean of the College, Lewis has developed a unique love for the University — a love that pushes her to grow to her greatest potential.

On September 27, 2024, Lewis came to the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI) and spoke about what this constructive love looks like. How can Harvard grow back into what it once was? Lewis discussed much of this in his book on higher education, *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?*, which focuses on the failures that a university subjects itself to when it focuses so heavily on academic excellence that it loses sight of its ultimate purpose: turning young people into educated, well-rounded, and responsible adults.

In this conversation at AAI, Lewis accredited this shift in higher education to artificial disciplinary divides and the reluctance of students to stray from their selected departments. Lewis promotes the opposite; he encourages students to take classes outside of their fields, using their time in school to experiment and grow.

While discussing the importance of multidisciplinary learning, Lewis spoke on how his educational journey and experience at Harvard led him to view the humanities as an essential part of forming a holistic student. He noted that disciplinary divisions are not inherent to the education system, but are a rather recent academic development.

“Disciplinary divisions are an artifact of the way the academic enterprise has developed, not in ancient times, but really only in the last century/century and a half,” Lewis said. “It used to be that everybody taught everything, and you were supposed to know everything. We understand why that’s not feasible anymore.”



Lewis made sure to distinguish between interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary learning, clarifying his preference for the latter. “It’s not like these are discrete, opposing things interacting,” he said, drawing from his undergraduate advisor Tony Oettinger, who was both a linguist and computer scientist. “The individual should draw from multiple threads to inform their learning.”

In an attempt to bring multidisciplinary learning back into the 2020s classroom, Lewis started teaching a class in his retirement titled, “Classic Papers of Computer Science.” The course is open to all of Harvard and was attended by over 100 students last year. It goes through 50 papers on the history of computer science, ranging from Aristotle to the 1980s.

“We start with Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*, true and false,” Lewis said. “I start the class with Raphael’s *School of Athens*, where everybody’s talking, everybody’s listening, nobody’s alone. Nobody’s sitting there waiting for somebody else to explain something to them. This is what we’re trying to create. Everybody’s got a different background, and they bring different things to the table.”

While speaking on this class, Lewis criticized the modern territoriality in academia and advocated for a more integrated approach to education. “There’s a very strong disincentive for faculty to be multidisciplinary because they will get stuff wrong, and they’re embarrassed when they do,” he said. “It would be an ambition for me for the perfect university to, among all of the other things we need to address, lower the level of resentment and offense when we wander out of our designated lanes.”

In saying this, Lewis stressed the need for open mindedness across the whole University — for faculty as well as students. All must not be scared to branch out of their disciplines to form a more holistic education, both for themselves and for others. This will inevitably involve some failure, but as Lewis argues, that’s the beauty of great academic adventure.

DR. HARRY LEWIS’ BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS



Q: *What’s a book that changed your life?*

A: “I read *The Origin of Species* in my early teens, and it completely changed my understanding of time and of the order of the universe. There was no going back after that — I have ever since been a materialist, skeptical of metaphysical explanations, and always try to see things from through a lens of gradual changes over incomprehensible spans of time.”

Q: *What book would you recommend that all students read while in college?*

A: “It would be cheating to recommend *Excellence Without a Soul*! I am trying to write an advice book for students going to college. But I don’t have it yet. I’m just going to recommend two of my favorite books — really the only books I reread regularly.”

“George Orwell’s *Coming up for Air*: It’s an easy read, funny and absurd, but it’s also about our relation to our younger and older selves, and to our sense of home and belonging, the constancy and change in our lives. And an uneasy sense that we are on the precipice of a catastrophic war, as we always seem to be today. [It’s] humorous but not cheerful.

“Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*: This is a cheat because it’s about the part of Montana where my summer place is, except that it’s also about love and aging and death, and the eternity of natural beauty as a setting for the messes we make of our human lives. But the main reason to read it is that the prose is moving and spectacular and pellucid.

These are two books which are not only good reading for college students — they are two books that are short and riveting enough that you could actually get college students to read them!”