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Mental barriers

At Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, the Clark Center, the hub of the university's Bio-X multidisciplinary programme, sits just a stone's throw from the medical school, the computer science building, the chemistry department and the engineering department. Does that naturally encourage interaction? Not necessarily, said Charles Kruger, emeritus dean of research and graduate policy, speaking to a delegation from the Biotechnology Industry Organization's annual meeting in San Francisco last week.

"Walking back and forth is no problem," Kruger told the visitors. "The problem is thinking you can do that." Kruger's words resonate at a time when 'interdisciplinary' is a buzzword, but making it really happen is more difficult. The Clark Center, with its central circular courtyard, corridors on the outside, glass-walled labs, and a coffee shop on the top floor, is engineered to create interactions.

Bricks, mortar and style are being used as a tool to recruit people (*Nature* 424, 858-859; 2003) and facilitate interaction and inspiration (*Nature* 424, 718-720; 2003). But mindset may be more important than architecture. "How do you get promoted if you are one of many authors on a paper?" asked one audience member. "Who gets credit for a patent when a large team is involved in the discovery" asked another.

Kruger's reply was that people who opt to work in an interdisciplinary environment self-select for cooperation and tend to sort out such issues with a little thought. "The physical barriers here are not as great as the mental barriers," he said. The real issue may be finding such common ground — and career advancement rewards — for scientists who don't work in such environments.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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