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Interdisciplinary Research, Tenure Review, and Guardians of the Disciplinary Order

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ABSTRACT

While interdisciplinarity has been promoted in universities for decades, research suggests that untenured faculty struggle to receive recognition for their interdisciplinary research. Informed by the microfoundations of institutional theory and discursive legitimation, we examine how members of academic departments participate in the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research in a prestigious private university. Our analysis draws on 59 interviews with department chairs, directors of interdisciplinary centers, and disciplinary and interdisciplinary untenured faculty in the STEM fields, the social sciences, and the humanities. Our findings reveal three mechanisms and processes through which tenure and promotion norms become legitimated and reproduced in academic departments: 1) institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping, 2) discursive legitimation of the expulsion of interdisciplinarity at the pre-tenure stage, and 3) scholarly positioning through discursive boundary strategies directed at rationalizing the expulsion of interdisciplinarity or the expansion of existing tenure and promotion norms. Taken together, these findings advance our understanding of the tensions between the promotion of interdisciplinary research in higher education institutions, reproduction of the disciplinary order in academic departments, and interdisciplinary early-career scholars' career advancement.

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Microfoundations of institutional theory; discursive legitimation; tenure review; tenure and promotion norms; interdisciplinary research

During the past decades, the promotion of interdisciplinary research has been transforming the field of higher education (Barringer et al., 2020; Frickel et al., 2016; Harris, 2010; Leahey & Barringer, 2020). Creating knowledge across disciplines, theories, and methods is seen as a source of novelty and a useful way to advance science and research on grand societal challenges (Barringer et al., 2020). There are numerous funding opportunities available for interdisciplinary research. The National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, states, foundations, and universities have provided resources for interdisciplinarity (Hackett, 2000; Harris, 2010; Holley, 2009;

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Sá, 2008). Within universities, investments in interdisciplinarity have resulted in new educational programs and research centers that aim to transform academia (Borrego et al., 2014; Geiger, 1990; Jacobs & Frickel, 2009; Mäkinen et al., 2020).

Although interdisciplinarity has been encouraged in many ways, a tension exists between “the scientific promise of the interdisciplinary path and the academic prospect of the tenure track” (Rhoten & Parker, 2006, p. 2046). As disciplines and departments largely determine the organization of academia and academic careers (e.g., Abbott, 1981; Sá, 2008; Turner et al., 2015), interdisciplinarity challenges norms concerning tenure and promotion (Campbell, 2005; Chubin & Hackett, 1990; Klein & Falk-Krzesinski, 2017). Relatedly, research has shown that interdisciplinary scholars struggle to build and communicate their scholarly identities and fit in the discipline-based organization of academia (Felt et al., 2012; Gewin, 2014; Gonzales & Rincones, 2012; Simula & Scott, 2021; Woiwode & Froese, 2021). Some studies have suggested that early-career researchers recognize the career risks and are less likely to engage with interdisciplinarity than senior scholars (Carayol & Thi, 2005; Sobey et al., 2013). Despite research that sheds light on the career barriers and risks, more research is needed to understand how interdisciplinarity concretely impacts academic careers and outcomes such as receiving tenure (Leahey et al., 2017).

Drawing on the microfoundations of institutional theory and discursive legitimation, we contribute to this research by studying the mechanisms and processes through which tenure and promotion norms become legitimated and reproduced in academic departments. We argue that members of academic departments are uniquely positioned to maintain the institution of disciplinary order by creating conditions and engaging in practices that devalue interdisciplinary research in tenure and promotion reviews. Accordingly, the microfoundations of institutional theory propose that individuals’ micro-level engagement with their organizations leads to the institutionalization of certain principles, practices, and norms (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008). The microfoundations approach refers to the interactions and relationships between organizational members — such as those between tenured and untenured faculty in academic departments — that form the underlying structure of organizations and that facilitate the institutionalization and maintenance of particular norms and processes (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). In the present study, we complement the microfoundations approach with discursive legitimation, which is concerned with creating an understanding of acceptable norms in a specific setting through language (Vaara et al., 2006). It allows us to investigate how members of academic departments use discursive legitimation strategies — such as authorization — to portray some research as legitimate and others as illegitimate in tenure evaluations (e.g., Mampaey et al., 2020; Vaara et al., 2006). Moreover, Gieryn’s

(1983; 1998) notions of discursive boundary strategies help us shed light on how faculty members discursively demarcate and justify their own work as legitimate from that of others.

This conceptual framework allows us to investigate the following research question: How do members of academic departments participate in the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research? We draw on 59 in-depth interviews, which were conducted in a prestigious private research university with senior faculty (full professors) and untenured disciplinary and interdisciplinary faculty (assistant professors) in the STEM fields, the social sciences, and the humanities. Our findings make important contributions to extant research on interdisciplinarity and academic careers. First, our findings suggest that despite the promotion of interdisciplinarity in universities, tenure and promotion norms, and how they are used to assess academic work in departments, have remained largely unchanged. Second, our findings shed light on how interdisciplinary research is seen as being at odds with research excellence, which affects career advancement among untenured interdisciplinary scholars. Third, although tenure and promotion norms appear highly institutionalized, our findings show how interdisciplinary scholars, especially in the STEM fields, were able to develop strategies for legitimizing their unconventional research profiles. Finally, our findings demonstrate that the microfoundations of institutional theory approach combined with discursive legitimation is a valuable framework for analyzing the tensions between the promotion of interdisciplinary research at the university level, reproduction of the disciplinary order in departments, and interdisciplinary early-career scholars' advancement in academic careers.

Next, we present our literature review on academic careers and interdisciplinary research. We then describe the conceptual framework focusing on the microfoundations of institutional theory and discursive legitimation that guides our research. We explain our research setting, data, and method. The analysis presents the mechanisms and processes through which tenure and promotion norms in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research are legitimated, reproduced, and reinforced in academic departments. We conclude by discussing our main contributions to research on interdisciplinary careers in universities.

Interdisciplinary research and advancement in academic careers

Extant research has shown that interdisciplinary scholars face barriers to academic career advancement. Some of these barriers are structural meaning that disciplines and academic departments determine not only the curriculum, knowledge production, and resources but also academic career structures and paths (Abbott, 1981; Becher, 1995; Sá,

2008; Turner et al., 2015). Structural challenges then arise from an academic rewards system that prefers disciplinary research in promotion and tenure review criteria (Klein & Falk-Krzesinski, 2017; Turner et al., 2015).

A related challenge concerns academic evaluation and publishing. Although interdisciplinary research has been widely promoted, many argue that academic evaluation has remained intellectually conservative (Chubin & Hackett, 1990; Langfeldt & Kyvik, 2010; Mäkinen, 2019). As academics rely on discipline-specific norms when evaluating research quality (Campbell, 2005; Cetina, 1999; Gieryn, 1998; Lamont et al., 2006; Lamont, 2009), those attempting to cross disciplinary boundaries are likely to face obstacles not only in academic publishing but also in tenure and promotion reviews. While new interdisciplinary journals are emerging, their quality and prestige is put into question which may affect career advancement among interdisciplinary early-career scholars (Campbell, 2005; Clark, 1996; Daily & Ehrlich, 1999; Gewin, 2014; Rafols et al., 2012).

At an individual level, interdisciplinary researchers experience role strain straddling departmental structures and interdisciplinary research. Boardman and Bozeman (2007) found that interdisciplinary researchers tend to experience role strain and be overworked, which can affect decisions to leave academia. Interdisciplinary researchers struggle with taking on departmental responsibilities and responding to their expectations while at the same time putting time and effort in their work in interdisciplinary research centers. Furthermore, at the tenure review stage, in addition to showcasing an excellent research program and publication record, an individual researcher needs to communicate what is their scholarly identity (Felt et al., 2012; Gewin, 2014; Rhoten & Parker, 2006). Prior research has shown that interdisciplinary scholars struggle to communicate a scholarly identity that resonates with their disciplinary colleagues and those evaluating their achievements (Felt et al., 2012; Gonzales & Rincones, 2012; Simula & Scott, 2021; Woiwode & Froese, 2021).

Furthermore, extant research has established that the criteria for tenure-worthiness produce and maintain race, class, and gender related inequalities in academia (e.g., Baez, 2000; O'Meara et al., 2018). Concerning the present study, interdisciplinarity may be related to gender differences in career advancement (Leahey, 2007; Leahey et al., 2008). Analyzing how academic visibility and specialization explain gender differences in earnings in the fields of sociology and linguistics, Leahey (2007) discovered that women are less likely to specialize than men. This hindered their productivity which limited their visibility resulting in a disadvantage in salary. Such findings suggest that if disciplinary specialization is perceived as an important tenure and promotion norm, women who aim for scholarly breadth rather than specialization are at a disadvantaged position.

Yet some research suggests that engaging in interdisciplinary research generates career benefits for early-career scholars. Kaplan et al. (2017) studied an interdisciplinary nanotechnology research center where students were able to span disciplinary boundaries and act as translators and through this work, generated new research that brought them career benefits. Analyzing how an interdisciplinary dissertation affected the first years of graduates' academic careers in a particular cohort, Millar (2013) showed that compared to other PhD graduates, those who reported that they conducted interdisciplinary research in their dissertation were more likely to obtain academic employment. The study concluded, however, that academic career opportunities were changing indicating a need to monitor universities' hiring practices. Finally, by studying individual researchers and their publication records, Leahey et al. (2017) showed that while interdisciplinary work may be related to less productivity, there were potential career benefits in the form of increased citations.

Although most research suggests that engagement in interdisciplinarity creates career barriers for early-career scholars, there are some studies that indicate potential career benefits. However, these studies rarely focus on the question of how interdisciplinarity is impacting chances of receiving tenure and being promoted. We advance knowledge in this area by analyzing how tenure and promotion norms are legitimated and reproduced in different academic fields.

Microfoundations of institutional theory and discursive legitimation

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) seminal work on new institutionalism has become a popular theoretical lens in different fields, including in higher education. The theory proposes that organizations act in institutional fields that have rules and belief systems that define what is appropriate and legitimate in each context. More recently, the theory has been shifting from a macro-level approach toward a multilevel paradigm that includes individuals more explicitly (e.g., Bechky, 2011; Fine & Hallett, 2014). Accordingly, the microfoundations of institutional theory recognize that "much analytical purchase can be gained by developing a micro-level component of institutional analysis" (Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 276).

The microfoundations of institutional theory perceive individuals as being engaged within their organizations and, over time, this micro-level engagement results in the institutionalization of organizational principles, practices, and norms (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), such as those concerned with tenure and promotion. In other words, an organization's behaviors, structures, and policies are not only a function of its environment and history, but also influenced by its microfoundations (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). In this line of research, the focus is on the everyday activities and social

dynamics through which institutions are constituted and exert their power and influence (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Powell & Rerup, 2017).

In recent years, the microfoundations approach to understanding academic institutions has been gaining popularity (e.g., Barringer & Riffe, 2018; Bozoğlu & Göktürk, 2023; Cantwell, 2015; Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). These studies have shown that social processes in situated contexts and micro-level engagement in organizational activities provide new insights to our understanding of the field of higher education. Demonstrating how micro-level activities can impact the broader field, Cantwell (2015) analyzed micro-level laboratory work to show how microdynamics of academic knowledge production contributed to academic capitalism. Taylor and Cantwell (2015) used the microfoundations approach to identify faculty members' motivations for recruiting and competing for international doctoral students. Shifting from faculty members to other actors in the field of higher education, Barringer and Riffe (2018) examined the ways in which trustees can influence institutional behaviors, structures, and policies in elite research universities.

While the microfoundations of institutional theory approach allows us to identify the micro-level engagement through which faculty members maintain and reproduce tenure and promotion norms, discursive legitimation allows us to capture how these same actors use language and discursive strategies to portray scholarly practices and positions as either appropriate or inappropriate. Accordingly, through discursive legitimation, organizational actors aim to convince other members of the legitimacy of their claims and perspectives through different rhetorical moves (Vaara et al., 2006). Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) considered authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis as four ways in which language can be used in the construction of legitimacy. Later studies have relied on the same strategies as well as developed new ones. In a recent study by Mampaey et al. (2020), the authors relied on three of the mentioned strategies to show how a new brand value concerned with student diversity was instilled among university members. By drawing on the legitimation strategy of authorization, for instance, organizational members sought to legitimate the new brand of student diversity by referring to the official policies of the institution which enforced compliance with the brand. When relying on moral evaluation as a strategy, they argued that the staff and the students should be a reflection of the broader society meaning that the institution had to embrace diversity. The shared element in these examples of discursive legitimation strategies is that they enable the establishment of some things as appropriate and others as inappropriate, and that their use can generate dialectical tensions between groups with varying viewpoints (Mampaey et al., 2020; Vaara et al., 2006).

Relevant to our research context, Gieryn's (1983, 1998) discursive boundary strategies are directed at reinforcing understandings about what is acceptable in science and what is not, and how individuals position themselves and others

in relation to these distinctions. These discursive boundary strategies include expulsion (exclusion of rivals/others), expansion (control over rivals/others), and protection of autonomy (protection of boundaries). Gieryn (1983) showed how through these strategies, academics draw on the rhetoric of science to achieve certain goals, for example expel those from their community who do not follow established disciplinary standards, such as interdisciplinary scholars, or find a way to incorporate a non-traditional but successful actor within the community.

As our conceptual framework suggests, the microfoundations of institutional theory approach reveals the practices through which particular tenure and promotion norms become reproduced while discursive legitimation and discursive boundary strategies shed light on how individuals use language to define what is acceptable and unacceptable and how they position themselves and others in this context. Next, we present our data and methods.

Data and methods

This study is part of a more extensive qualitative research project that draws on different types of data (e.g., observations, organizational records, interviews) to understand interdisciplinary research and how it is organized and conducted in universities. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers' university. The research context is a prestigious private research university, which is known for its welcoming approach to and promotion of interdisciplinary research. The university's culture is described as entrepreneurial and innovative, and the institution has provided support for the creation of interdisciplinary research centers and encouraged the recruitment of interdisciplinary faculty. These institutional characteristics and our initial observations concerning how interdisciplinarity was seen as a problem in tenure review piqued our interest in studying interdisciplinarity and tenure review.

Sampling procedure and data collection

In our analysis, we draw on 59 in-depth interviews. We started the data collection by interviewing senior faculty, that is, full professors in departments who oversaw academic mentoring and participated in the organization of tenure and promotion reviews. We interviewed both senior faculty who were department chairs and senior faculty, who in addition to their departmental responsibilities, were directors of interdisciplinary research centers. These senior faculty had a significant role in tenure and promotion reviews as they reviewed the dossiers, served on departmental committees, generated lists of external reviewers, presented recommendations, and voted on tenure and promotion cases.

The interview protocol for the senior faculty included questions about the mechanics of the tenure process, what departments looked for when hiring new faculty and granting tenure, specific criteria and expectations, and the mentoring practices for untenured faculty. We asked the interviewees to reflect on disciplinary and interdisciplinary research and how such approaches to research affected tenure review. We also requested names for untenured disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholars whom we could interview. Overall, this sampling approach among senior faculty resulted in 25 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in 2012–2013. Specifically, we interviewed eight senior faculty in the STEM fields, nine in the social sciences, and eight in the humanities.

We first conducted interviews with those senior faculty who had director positions in interdisciplinary research centers (one woman and seven men). When interviewing these eight individuals, we asked them who to interview as exemplary untenured interdisciplinary scholars (i.e., performing collaborative work that spanned disciplinary fields, publishing across fields). Additionally, we considered whether these suggested scholars were actively participating in the centers and engaging in interdisciplinary work using different data collected as part of the more extensive research project (e.g., observations, organizational records).

We then conducted interviews with those senior faculty who were department chairs. We selected an assortment of academic departments that spanned all areas of the university — for example biology, physics, medicine, bioengineering, political science, sociology, economics, history, and linguistics — which we grouped as the STEM fields, the social sciences, and the humanities. In doing so, we drew on Kagan's (2009) conceptualization of the three academic cultures, which he identified as the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Kagan (2009) argued that the cultures lacked a common core and that scholars were not aware of the implications of findings or arguments across fields. As a result, the three academic cultures developed distinct aims, research methods, understandings of data and evidence, and styles of argumentation. Given the selection of departments relevant for our study (e.g., Bioengineering, Civil and Environmental Engineering, Material Science and Engineering), we modified Kagan's conceptualization of the natural sciences identifying it as the STEM fields. We see value in grouping academic departments in this way, because the differences across the three cultures create variation in career promotion and advancement in relation to, for example, what are seen as expected grants and forms of publications, legitimate journals, and norms concerned with balancing different professional activities (e.g., O'Meara, 2005; O'Meara, 2011; Yair et al., 2022). Accordingly, the three cultures are likely to perceive the benefits and risks of interdisciplinary research for academic careers differently, which we explore in our analysis.

Of the 21 department chairs we contacted, 17 responded (four women and 13 men) and granted us interviews (81% response rate). When conducting interviews with the department chairs, much like with the directors of interdisciplinary research centers, we asked them whom they thought were exemplary interdisciplinary and disciplinary assistant professors in their departments that we could interview. In almost all cases, their designation of interdisciplinary scholars matched that of what we had learned from the directors of interdisciplinary research centers. Additionally, to make sure these interviewees could be described as interdisciplinary or disciplinary, we reviewed their research profiles, publications, and collaborations. We observed that for those identified as interdisciplinary, it was common that they published and collaborated across research fields. As such, we used different sources of information (e.g., accounts from directors of interdisciplinary research centers and department chairs, research profiles, CVs) to develop an understanding of which scholars could be identified as disciplinary and interdisciplinary. Importantly, when interviewing the untenured scholars, we asked whether they found this way of identifying their scholarly profiles acceptable.

We developed a list of potential study participants that included the recommended 42 disciplinary and interdisciplinary untenured faculty members. As we aimed for a balanced distribution of participants across academic cultures (Kagan, 2009), we included two more scholars who were identified as part of the more extensive qualitative research project using organizational records and information available online. In total, we contacted 44 untenured faculty of whom 34 responded and participated in interviews (77% response rate). These interviews were conducted in 2014–2015. In the STEM fields, we interviewed seven interdisciplinary and five disciplinary scholars. In the social sciences, we interviewed five interdisciplinary and five disciplinary scholars. In the humanities, we interviewed five interdisciplinary and seven disciplinary scholars. In total, we interviewed 17 interdisciplinary and 17 disciplinary scholars. Of these 34 interviewees, 12 were women and 22 were men. We utilized an interview protocol that included questions on the scholar's education, research, and standards for academic work within their discipline. We asked about the early-career researchers' understandings of the tenure criteria and their thoughts, strategies, and plans for their tenure reviews. [Table 1](#) summarizes descriptive information regarding the interview data.

Table 1. Descriptive Details of the Interview Corpus.

	Departments Represented	Number of Interviewees	Chairs or Directors	Untenured Faculty	
				Interdisciplinary	Disciplinary
STEM	12	20	8	7	5
Social Sciences	9	19	9	5	5
Humanities	8	20	8	5	7
Total	29	59	25	17	17

The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' offices by the three authors. The interviews ranged in length from 34 to 116 minutes, with an average length of 58 minutes, and they were transcribed. To preserve our study participants' confidentiality, we do not share a list of all the targeted departments or the details of the research the participants conducted.

Data analysis

The data analysis was performed in two main phases using the Atlas.ti to systemize, code, and compare the data. In the first phase the transcripts were scanned, and accounts and phrases were highlighted when they related to 1) tenure review process, expectations, and strategies and 2) tenure review and disciplinary and interdisciplinary research (e.g., discussions of tenure track, tenure review, criteria, dossier, CV, and external letters). Similarly, accounts were identified where interviewees connected tenure and promotion norms to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research and careers. Assigning open codes to these sections enabled the development of an initial descriptive coding, which provided insight into the patterns and themes in the interview corpus (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

In the second phase, we utilized our conceptual framework more explicitly to analyze the patterns and themes discovered in the first phase of data analysis. We began to look for accounts that revealed how scholars engaged in or were affected by different institutional practices aimed at legitimating and reproducing tenure and promotion norms. These accounts focused on for instance hiring and promotion, academic mentoring, and identification of external letters writers as part of tenure reviews. We grouped data excerpts under the different career levels (senior faculty and untenured faculty) and the three academic cultures. Next, we analyzed accounts identified in the first phase of data analysis to see how scholars relied on discursive legitimation strategies. We drew on Van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) legitimation strategies and Gieryn's (1983, 1998) discursive boundary strategies as sensitizing concepts to understand how our study participants engaged in discursive legitimation concerning tenure and promotion norms and disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. As we will show, our findings aligned particularly well with the discursive strategy of authorization and the discursive boundary strategies of expulsion and expansion. This phase in the research process required several iterations and going back and forth between data, emerging themes, and the literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Study limitations

Our data collection has limitations that must be acknowledged before we present the findings. First, it is important to consider whether there

was sampling bias in how we selected untenured scholars to be interviewed by asking for referrals from directors of interdisciplinary research centers and department chairs. We do not recognize this as a significant source of bias because we relied on different sources of information and various data collected as part of an extensive study on interdisciplinarity (e.g., accounts from directors of interdisciplinary research centers and department chairs, accounts from untenured faculty, research profiles, CVs) to make judgments about disciplinary and interdisciplinary research profiles which were confirmed in interviews with the untenured scholars. Second, grouping academic departments according to the three academic cultures may obscure some differences concerning interdisciplinarity and academic careers. This warrants more detailed future research. Third, the empirical context — a prestigious private university — and the limited number of interviews for different types of scholars (e.g., tenured and untenured, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, three academic cultures) affect the generalizability of our findings. We also suspect that the institutional standing of the university influences faculty members' motivations and justifications for maintaining certain tenure and promotion norms. Finally, our data were not collected very recently, which means that some of the career risks concerning interdisciplinarity may have lessened over the years. However, more recently collected data on interdisciplinarity and academic careers suggest that interdisciplinary early-career researchers continue to experience the kinds of career risks we discuss in our findings in the following section (e.g., Simula & Scott, 2021; Woiwode & Froese, 2021).

Legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms

This section presents our analysis of how members of academic departments participate in the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms through 1) institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping (i.e., hiring, promotion, and academic mentoring), 2) discursive legitimation of the expulsion of interdisciplinarity at the pre-tenure stage, and 3) scholarly positioning through discursive boundary strategies. In line with our sampling approach, we discuss our findings on the STEM fields, the social sciences, and the humanities in separate subsections. Within each subsection, we explain how scholars at different career levels engaged in or were affected by the previously summarized mechanisms and processes concerned with the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms.

STEM fields

In the STEM fields, the senior faculty's engagement in institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping was a key mechanism in the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. A commonly discussed practice was the hiring of new faculty, which was portrayed as a gatekeeping moment in which the senior faculty could influence what kind of qualities new hires had. It was also a moment in which the senior faculty, both department chairs and center directors, assessed untenured scholars' potential for achieving their departments' expectations for tenure and promotion. The main goal in hiring was to identify "superstars" who could maintain the institutional standing of the university and its departments. As this chair explained:

If we're going to hire someone, we have to hire someone who is a superstar. We have to—this is [name of university]—so you need to be hiring the very best people, who can stand on their own. It's a very difficult challenge. They have to become so famous in six years, or seven years, that 12 of the top people in their field, broadly construed, [...] have to say that they are among the best in the world and have great potential to be among the very best. That's a really big challenge. [ID-29]

By selecting assistant professors who demonstrated high potential for scholarly excellence, the senior faculty's actions contributed to the legitimation and reproduction of particular tenure and promotion norms. In addition to scholarly excellence, the senior faculty explained that in tenure and promotion decisions they looked for independence in research, lab leadership, and the ability to gain research funding. These norms were discursively legitimated by authorization meaning that the institutional standing of the university and the institution of the tenure review system were used to justify the high expectations for untenured scholars. Accordingly, one department chair explained what kinds of outcomes were recognized and rewarded in their tenure review system:

The cake still is do you have your own R01 funding? Do you have your own publications as senior author or first author? Collaborations only matter if the cake is solid. Let's say someone has a lot of collaborations. They're collaborating with people all over campus, but they're always middle author in a paper. That, in the current system, is not recognized or rewarded. [ID-13]

By specifying what was and was not recognized in the tenure review system, the senior faculty in the STEM fields were able to discursively legitimize the expulsion of interdisciplinarity at the pre-tenure stage. By collaborating "all over the campus," as the chair argued, untenured scholars were not demonstrating required independence in research. Another department chair said that untenured faculty should "not collaborate with other [faculty] than to

the extent of what's necessary for you to move your work forward" because in the tenure process, "*you* [the scholar up for review] have to be smart enough" [ID-35]. As interdisciplinary research was perceived as obscuring the norms of independence and quality of the untenured scholar under review, such career choices were portrayed as risky and inappropriate. For instance, if an untenured scholar did not have a clear disciplinary position and peer group, the identification of external letter writers in tenure review was portrayed as "a kiss of death," as this department chair noted:

Just because it's really hard for people to evaluate your tenure case, if you have cut across different disciplines. I have friends that didn't get tenure because they tried to be interdisciplinary. When it came down to evaluate them [...] it was just people who did [research area] reviewing papers in [disciplinary subfield]. My friends didn't do that, so they couldn't evaluate the work. They said, "Well, he doesn't come to my conferences. He doesn't write." It's almost like a kiss of death to be interdisciplinary when it comes time for tenure. It doesn't mean your work isn't any good, it just means that people can't—I think we don't have a system to evaluate it yet. Everybody knows it's important, but the biggest impediment is just, who's going to evaluate it? [ID-29]

Through this cautionary tale concerning their interdisciplinary friends, the interviewee argued that interdisciplinarity at the pre-tenure stage was not a sensible career move as it reduced chances of receiving tenure. They concluded by saying, "I can't give them tenure if they don't get those great external letters" [ID-29].

Because interdisciplinary research was seen as in opposition with established tenure and promotion norms, academic mentoring was presented as another institutional micro-practice through which the senior faculty could reinforce the idea that interdisciplinary research was not recommended at the pre-tenure stage. They explained how they as senior faculty members would guide them away from such activities. One chair said: "If I saw someone who was [doing] every single little bit of work [...] with other faculty and never anything on their own, I would definitely suggest that they be doing some work on their own" [ID-38]. On the other end, interdisciplinary untenured scholars were concretely affected by this institutional micro-practice. One interdisciplinary STEM scientist reflected on their upcoming tenure review case and described how senior faculty in the department had commented on the prospects: "I'm up now. Yeah, I'm worried. It's a very high-risk case. I've been told that right from the beginning. Everyone continues to tell me that" [ID-17].

Both disciplinary and interdisciplinary untenured scholars were aware of the established tenure and promotion norms concerned with excellence and independence in research, lab leadership, and the ability to gain research funding. When discussing tenure and promotion expectations and their chances of achieving them, they engaged in positioning their research profiles in relation to these norms and more importantly, the boundary between

disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Depending on whether the untenured faculty engaged in disciplinary or interdisciplinary research, these discursive boundary strategies were concerned with the expulsion of interdisciplinarity or the expansion of existing tenure and promotion norms to accommodate interdisciplinary work. Regarding the expulsion of interdisciplinarity, a disciplinary untenured STEM scientist related disciplinary and interdisciplinary research in the following way explaining his own disciplinary position and portraying interdisciplinarity as a problem:

I don't know anybody who didn't get tenure because they just kept on doing the same thing they did for their Ph.D., and then they—just like this idea that if you're very disciplinary, then you can make incremental advances in that area. You just keep making it better and better, whereas if you go into a new area—well. [...] I am not going to do multidisciplinary stuff because I think that that's a curse from a tenure point of view. [ID-12]

Here, the discursive boundary strategy is concerned with using the distinction between disciplinary and interdisciplinary research to justify the interviewee's own scholarly position. Disciplinary research and incremental advances in a single discipline were portrayed as legitimate research at the pre-tenure stage. Because in the current tenure review system interdisciplinarity was seen as “a curse from a tenure point of view,” it was framed as an unwise career move. With regards to the expansion of existing tenure and promotion norms, the untenured interdisciplinary scientists explained their scholarly position in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research by highlighting the limitations of disciplinary research and the benefits of interdisciplinarity. For example, an interdisciplinary scholar in the STEM fields explained his own scholarly position and practice by arguing that high quality research was more important than credit and tenure, and that it was more valuable to aim for broader impact through interdisciplinary research approach than short-term impact through disciplinary research approach.

I guess you could fret about that kind of stuff and worry who's getting credit and everything like that. I'd rather just get the work done and make something that has larger impact eventually, rather than short-term impact right away. I think it probably would've been easier if I sat in the same discipline and more importantly, in the same community of people. [ID-27]

Another untenured interdisciplinary STEM scientist positioned himself in relation disciplinary and interdisciplinary research by suggesting that the current discipline-focused tenure expectations were not demanding enough, saying: “I think shooting for the tenure bar is a little bit kind of—<*gestures that this is a low bar*>. I mean, I think it's better to try to just maximize [your potential] and do the best research you can, and then not worry about [tenure] so much” [ID-24]. This scientist implied that working to the level that will receive tenure would be under-achieving and that doing the interdisciplinary

work he did would surpass the tenure bar. These discursive boundary strategies concerned with scholarly positioning in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research were aimed at legitimating interdisciplinarity and expanding the tenure and promotion norms. In the STEM fields, directors of interdisciplinary research centers agreed on the expansion perspective stating that it did not make sense to reproduce the existing norms. As one noted:

I've talked to colleagues who think the tenure system may be outdated because it's so—it encourages you to focus, and maybe we don't need people to focus anymore. We need people to be strategic thinkers on how all these different disciplines are going to come together to solve more complicated problems. [ID-23]

In addition to discursive boundary strategies, untenured interdisciplinary STEM scholars discussed externally validated legitimacy markers, such as publishing in top journals (e.g., PNAS, Nature, Science) or receiving major research grants (e.g., NSF), which could legitimize their interdisciplinary research and careers. One interdisciplinary scientist noted, “I have a grant that lets me do whatever I want. I can do anything I want” [ID-4]. After winning this grant, the senior faculty in their department perceived the interdisciplinary work differently: “I'm in a department that lets me do anything I want: they're going to call it mechanical engineering no matter what I do” [ID-4]. The externally validated legitimacy marker — a major grant — led to the expansion of tenure and promotion norms as the senior faculty were willing to incorporate this initially untraditional but now highly successful scholar in their community.

Social sciences

Much like in the STEM fields, the senior faculty in the social sciences engaged in institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping, such as hiring and promotion, which allowed them to legitimate and reproduce existing tenure and promotion norms in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. In their accounts, the authority of the institutional standing of the university and the tenure review system were similarly used to discursively legitimize the high expectations for tenure and promotion. A department chair demonstrated the selectivity and the search for excellence in the hiring and promotion processes by the “historical tenure rate” in his department:

We have relatively few tenure review cases, even though we're a relatively large department, partly because what tends to happen is that the people that get to a tenure review stage, it's already a fairly selected [. . .] the historical tenure rate here in [department] at [name of the institution] has been about 20 percent. [ID-22]

This department chair explained the low percentage by those untenured faculty who left before their tenure review. During the tenure track period, he argued, the expectations for tenure and promotion were made so clear that those untenured faculty, who were unsure or saw their tenure cases as risky, left the department on their own will. In such instances, the institutional micro-practice concerning gatekeeping did not require direct interference from the senior faculty. The chair continued to explain:

Often, they get into their second term as assistant professor, and it's clear that they're not going to get tenure at [name of the institution], even though they may be doing fabulously well. They might get an attractive outside offer, and often they—that just seems like a sensible career move, to take it without waiting until the very end. [ID-22]

The institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping allowed the senior faculty in the social sciences, both department chairs and center directors, to specify and reinforce the norms of research excellence and “hyper-specialization” in a single discipline. As the following director of an interdisciplinary center observed:

The incentives for junior faculty are interesting because at a great university like this one, where getting tenure is supposed to be a process that is demanding, you have really big incentives to hyper-specialize so that there's no question about who the other people are in your field that are competent to comment on you. [ID-5]

The norm of hyper-specialization was discursively legitimized through authorization by referring to “a great university like this.” The argued benefit of hyper-specialization was that it made the untenured scholar a recognizable member of a disciplinary community and eased the identification of external letter writers in the tenure review process. To demonstrate that research was recognizable in the discipline, the untenured scholars were advised to publish in the most prominent disciplinary journals. A director of an interdisciplinary center said that “there's a lot to be said for making sure that some or most of your work is published in the disciplinary journals” [ID-5]. One chair noted, “if they're publishing in good journals that members of our discipline recognize, then they have very good job prospects” [ID-15]. By specifying what was expected and recognized in their tenure evaluations, these senior faculty in the social sciences discursively legitimized the expulsion of interdisciplinary research at the pre-tenure stage. The following department chair suggested for instance that interdisciplinary research was not associated with the kind of research excellence they expected to see in tenure reviews:

The concern about interdisciplinarity is that the people who are doing interdisciplinary work are either doing it because they're not terribly good at a given discipline, and they're looking around for something else to do, or because they sort of reached their—hit their head on the ceiling of their advance in a given discipline. I'm not sure if that is true, but that is the bad rap that interdisciplinarity sometimes gets. [ID-31]

While noting they were not sure if it was true, the chair established a distinction that suggested that those who were not good scholars in a given discipline turned to interdisciplinary research practice because they were not able to advance their own fields. In other words, the expulsion of interdisciplinarity at the pre-tenure stage was discursively legitimized by the notions that disciplinary research signaled excellence, which was required by their institution, and interdisciplinary research inferiority.

As hyper-specialization and high-quality research were portrayed as the only path to tenure-worthiness, the senior faculty in the social sciences engaged in the institutional micro-level practice of academic mentoring through which they communicated tenure and promotion expectations and guided untenured scholars toward the right career path. A department chair justified such practice: “The young ones are all doing — if they’re not tenured yet, it’s almost criminal to drag them into these [interdisciplinary] activities because it may interfere with their capacity to be awarded tenure” [ID-3]. The untenured social scientists described their experiences with academic mentoring and guidance through which senior faculty reinforced the norms of producing high-quality disciplinary research. One interdisciplinary untenured scholar remembered a university-wide event where they learned what really mattered in tenure review:

For junior faculty there are these annual events like provost talks to you about tenure, or somebody talks to you about tenure. I’ve been to one of these, and only one thing stuck in my mind from it, but there was this slide. This was [name] talking. There’s this slide with a list of things—it’s things people think matter for tenure, and it says teaching, research, service, awards, grants, honors, and then he clicks to the next slide, and it’s like, “Things that actually matter for tenure.” All of them are greyed out, and it just says, “Research.” [...] I was like, “Okay, that’s very clear.” I think you’ve made yourself extremely explicit, like “Don’t mess up. We don’t care about anything else. Be a highly productive and influential scholar.” [ID-10]

Another interdisciplinary untenured social scientist reflected on a departmental advising program as an institutional micro-practice through which tenure and promotion norms were similarly reinforced. They recounted how a senior faculty member, with whom they had gone to lunch as part of a departmental advising program, had jokingly explained the existing tenure and promotion norms:

We get in this car, going to lunch and they [senior scholars] are making fun of the institution. They think it’s a little silly because, well, we’ll see why. They’re saying, “Maybe we don’t need to do this advising.” The guy who is an older and very salty says, “Alright, you want some fuckin’ advice? Here’s some fuckin’ advice. To get tenure, you’re going to want to write a lot of good fuckin’ papers and publish them in good fuckin’ journals. This is better than the opposite of that advice, which is to write a few bad

fuckin' papers and publish them in bad fuckin' journals." He's like, "Let's tape record this and just play it for junior faculty. We can stop this advising." At the time, I was like, "Well, this is ridiculous," but now I've come to appreciate that advice because one can over-think the tenure thing, like, "Am I publishing in the right areas?" Really, it's pretty simple. You either publish stuff and then you'll probably get it, or you don't and you probably won't. [ID-16]

Like in the STEM fields, the untenured social scientists engaged in positioning their research profiles in relation to the boundary between disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. The untenured interdisciplinary social scientists, in particular, positioned their work in relation to the narrow disciplinary norms seeking to explain why they were motivated by interdisciplinarity despite it being portrayed as a career risk. As an interdisciplinary social scientist said: "I don't think I'd change [my work]. Because I'm motivated to do what I do by things other than that [tenure review] [...] It's hard to imagine doing it a different way" [ID-1]. Another interdisciplinary social scientist echoed this sentiment:

I have a good idea of what I'm interested in. Rather than adapting what I do to fit to the environment, or what the demands are, I'm pretty stubborn and just deciding I didn't spend all my time going to graduate school to do what someone else wants me to do. I've pretty much been playing the strategy of I'm going to do what I'm interested in, and what I find compelling and motivated by, and if it works out great, and if it doesn't that's fine too. [ID-28]

These untenured interdisciplinary social scientists relied on a discursive boundary strategy where they made a distinction between disciplinary scholars whose research was determined by the institution of the tenure review system and scholars, such as themselves, who followed their own interdisciplinary research interests. Through this discursive boundary strategy, they did not argue for expanding the existing tenure and promotion norms per se, but more subtly suggested that it did not make sense to be motivated only by the institutional tenure expectations.

Humanities

Much like their colleagues in the STEM fields and the social sciences, the senior faculty in the humanities talked about how they engaged in institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping, which enabled the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms. A department chair described how they looked for traditional research in their hiring and promotion decisions.

Hiring and tenuring are the most conservative moments in the life of any university or department. We can push in all kinds of directions otherwise, but those are the key

moments that are going to shape the future of the discipline. We are trained to conserve and pass on a precious legacy of practices and knowledge. I value that. [ID-39]

These norms concerned with traditional humanities scholarship were discursively legitimated by the strategy of authorization as it was the senior faculty's responsibility to safeguard the university's institutional standing and protect its disciplinary legacy. The same department chair went on to say:

We are really good at what we have traditionally done. We're some of the best people in the world at what the humanities is traditionally about. Those are fantastically valuable skills, and we are not going to give up being a voice that says those things matter. [...] I've got people who will take that role and defend the traditional style very effectively, and that's what they want to do. [ID-39]

Engagement in institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping allowed the senior faculty to "take that role and defend the traditional style very effectively" and in this way, reinforce tenure and promotion norms that emphasized disciplinary excellence.

To demonstrate that the untenured humanities scholar had a profile that could be perceived as traditional and tenure-worthy, they had to publish a single-authored book with transformative content. Department chairs in the humanities claimed that the humanities "fetishize the monograph" [ID-39; ID-18], and that "tenure decisions tend to be based around the book" [ID-18]. While the format of the publication was described as important in tenure review, so was its content. To be tenured, early-career faculty members had to produce scholarship that changed the discipline's understanding of a particular topic. A tenure-worthy scholar was one "who's saying stuff that will unquestionably change the world of research" or is doing "ground-breaking stuff" [ID-2].

When specifying the tenure and promotion norms and what was not seen as tenure-worthy research, the senior faculty in the humanities discursively legitimized the expulsion of interdisciplinary research at the pre-tenure stage. Interdisciplinary research was portrayed as having limited ability to reach tenure and promotion expectations. The senior faculty argued that interdisciplinary work rarely resulted in the kinds of single-authored books with transformative thinking that they expected to see in tenure review and that interdisciplinary scholars ran the risk of producing redundant work. One department chair reflected on interdisciplinary work in digital humanities describing a prevalent attitude in the field, saying that "people [...] have a certain amount of healthy skepticism." According to him, such skeptics say "that while these things [interdisciplinary work in digital humanities] are kind of cool and fun to look at, are they really going to change the way in which we think about things in any significant way?" [ID-6]. This scholar described how some thought that interdisciplinary work lacked the ability to produce a significant change in understanding. The concern was, as another

department chair observed, that it might “merely confirm what we already knew” [ID-18]. Similarly to the other fields, the expulsion of interdisciplinary research at the pre-tenure stage was discursively legitimized by the notion that compared to disciplinary research, interdisciplinary work lacked excellence and prestige and hence reduced chances of receiving tenure.

The untenured humanities scholars engaged in positioning their research profiles in relation to tenure and promotion norms and while doing so, highlighted the boundary between disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. These discursive boundary strategies were sometimes concerned with rationalizing the expulsion of interdisciplinarity and sometimes with legitimizing the expansion of tenure and promotion norms to accommodate interdisciplinary work. In the following quote, a disciplinary humanities scholar described how they had over the course of their education internalized the norm of publishing a book thus positioning themselves within the discipline. The path to becoming a full member of the community meant you followed what other scholars had done before you.

I think that the idea of writing your book is so well-ingrained and we’ve all internalized this. I mean it’s just something that we’ve—like it’s something that you want to do in the humanities [. . .] It’s just for people who have grown up with books and know that that’s what the discipline is driven by and many of my senior colleagues have written good books. You can’t imagine not participating in that economy. [ID-43]

Another disciplinary humanities scholar relied on a discursive boundary strategy where they argued that interdisciplinary research was inappropriate given their disciplinary training thus seeking to legitimize the expulsion of interdisciplinarity.

People think of interdisciplinarity as doing something that they are not supposed to do [*chuckling*], because then that’s a plus. That tells me that there is a problem with your identity as a scholar because you feel that if you’re doing something else, it’s better than if you’re doing what you are supposed to be doing. That of course [. . .] is a logic that’s sounds ridiculous [*laughing*]. Why would something that you’re not supposed to do be more valuable than something that you have been trained to do? [ID-26]

The untenured interdisciplinary humanities scholars engaged in positioning their research profiles outside of clear disciplinary boundaries and argued for a need to expand tenure and promotion norms to recognize broader changes in the field. While it seemed to disciplinary scholars like they were doing something they were not supposed to do, as we saw in the previous quote, these interdisciplinary untenured scholars argued they were responding to changes in their research fields, which required interdisciplinarity. An interdisciplinary scholar felt strongly about their own role in the discipline wide transformation making the argument that interdisciplinary research approach allowed them to address real, important problems:

I have an ideological agenda, and I want to push my field towards using more of these [interdisciplinary] methods [...] What I want to do is convince members of my discipline that if they want to make progress on problems that they care about, they need to go to interdisciplinary research, they can't continue to look inward. [ID-21]

Through this discursive boundary strategy, the scholar portrayed interdisciplinary research as valuable as it allowed for making progress on important questions. Referring to their disciplinary colleagues by saying “they can't continue to look inward,” this interviewee suggested that disciplinary research approach was almost obsolete as it was associated with narrow problems and approaches that limited broader impact.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to uncover how members of academic departments participate in the legitimation and reproduction of tenure and promotion norms in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Drawing on the microfoundations of institutional theory and discursive legitimation, we identified three mechanisms and processes through which specific norms were legitimized and reinforced. First, the senior faculty engaged in institutional micro-practices concerned with evaluation and gatekeeping, which affected which kind of scholars were able to gain membership in the academic community. Second, the authority of the institutional standing of the university and the tenure review system were used to discursively legitimize discipline-focused tenure and promotion norms and the expulsion of interdisciplinarity at the pre-tenure stage. Third, the untenured scholars positioned themselves in relation to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research and while doing so, relied on discursive boundary strategies that allowed them to argue for the expulsion of interdisciplinarity or the expansion of existing tenure and promotion norms. Next, we discuss broader implications of this research.

First, while interdisciplinarity continues to be promoted by policymakers, funding agencies, industry partners, and universities (e.g., Borrego et al., 2014; Frickel et al., 2016; Hackett, 2000; Harris, 2010; Holley, 2009; Sá, 2008), our findings in the context of a prestigious private university suggest that tenure and promotion norms in academic departments have remained mostly unchanged. Therefore, and as Rhoten and Parker (2006) observed years ago, there is a tension between how higher education institutions present the opportunities around interdisciplinarity and how early-career interdisciplinary scholars can advance their academic careers. Our findings advance research on this tension by shedding light on how senior faculty through their roles as tenured members of academic departments define and reinforce tenure and promotion norms that may devalue interdisciplinary research. Institutional micro-practices such as hiring and promotion, academic mentoring, identification of external letter writers, and the overall organization of the

tenure review reinforced the senior faculty's ability to act as the guardians of the disciplinary order. Referring to the institutional standing of the university, the tenure review system, and disciplinary legacy, the senior faculty discursively legitimized their actions arguing that strong disciplinary work increased chances of receiving tenure while interdisciplinarity reduced them. The directors of interdisciplinary research centers in the STEM fields were the only senior faculty who suspected that it might be time to transform the existing tenure review system. Accordingly, we suspect that transformation in tenure and promotion norms is more likely to happen in the STEM fields than in the social sciences and the humanities. Relatedly, it appears that universities have generally failed to make those kinds of reforms at the departmental level that align with the institutional promotion of interdisciplinarity.

Second, our findings elucidate the complex relationship between interdisciplinary research and perceptions about research excellence, which impacts career advancement. As we showed, senior faculty particularly in the social sciences and the humanities argued that only selected disciplinary journals and publishers were able to signal such research excellence that their institutional standing required. This finding aligns with prior studies that have shown that the quality and prestige of interdisciplinary journals is questioned affecting the career advancement of junior researchers (Campbell, 2005; Clark, 1996; Daily & Ehrlich, 1999; Gewin, 2014; Rafols et al., 2012). In our study, interdisciplinary social scientists and humanities scholars struggled to publish in prominent disciplinary journals recognized by their institution. From the perspective of the three academic cultures (Kagan, 2009), there are few interdisciplinary journals for a broad audience in the social sciences and the humanities that have obtained a similarly high status as *Nature*, *Science*, and *PNAS* in the STEM fields. In some fields, interdisciplinary research is published in journals with lower rating in journal rankings affecting career advancement.

Third, our findings showed that despite the senior faculty's efforts through institutional micro-practices and discursive legitimation to exclude interdisciplinary research at the pre-tenure stage, the untenured interdisciplinary scholars, especially in the STEM fields, were successful at relying on varied strategies for legitimizing their unconventional research profiles. In general, the interviewed untenured interdisciplinary scholars used discursive boundary strategies to justify their scholarly positions and to highlight the benefits of interdisciplinary research and the limitations of disciplinary research. For instance, the untenured interdisciplinary STEM scientists argued that disciplinary research was associated with limited impact, incremental and conservative advances, and easily achievable tenure and promotion expectations. Interdisciplinary science, in turn, was portrayed as the more demanding research approach that could achieve significant long-term impact. What was more effective for career advancement, however, was the way in which the untenured

interdisciplinary STEM scientists used externally validated legitimacy markers, such as publishing in top journals or receiving major research grants, in the legitimation of interdisciplinary research and careers. This facilitated the expansion of existing tenure and promotion norms as the senior faculty were supportive of those untenured STEM scientists who could publish in prominent journals and win major grants, despite being interdisciplinary. In the social sciences and the humanities, untenured interdisciplinary scholars did not have such externally validated legitimacy markers available to them challenging efforts to expand existing tenure and promotion norms.

Finally, we see the calls to advance research on the microfoundations of higher education institutions as particularly relevant for understanding the tension between promoting interdisciplinarity in universities and constructing and maintaining disciplinary tenure and promotion norms in academic departments (e.g., Barringer & Riffe, 2018; Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Prior research has demonstrated how both administrators' and faculty members' actions form the foundation for accepted behavior, policies, and practices in universities and are therefore part of the microfoundations of these institutions (e.g., Barringer & Riffe, 2018; Cantwell, 2015). From this perspective, the extent to which untenured faculty members can engage with interdisciplinary research and build interdisciplinary careers will impact the university's broader commitment to interdisciplinarity. Yet our findings suggest that untenured interdisciplinary scholars have limited ability to advance in their careers and hence affect their institutions' commitment to interdisciplinarity. If senior faculty continue to act as the guardians of the disciplinary order through the tenure review system, it is difficult to implement interdisciplinarity in universities despite support from university presidents, provosts, and deans. Combining the analysis of microfoundational processes with discursive legitimation, however, sheds light on the subtle power struggles and dialectical tensions concerning how interdisciplinary research is perceived and evaluated in academic departments (Mampaey et al., 2020; Vaara et al., 2006). By analyzing the accounts of senior and untenured faculty as well as disciplinary and interdisciplinary untenured scholars, we could recognize tensions between these groups as they debated what is legitimate research and whether the tenure review system and its norms should be somehow transformed in relation to interdisciplinary research.

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