A Nobel laureate in physics once told me that after working on the reform of science education for a few years he was eager to return to something easier, like figuring out the dimensions of the universe. His quip summarizes what many of us in education research have always appreciated, whether tacitly or explicitly: We’re dealing with some terribly complex issues, the most significant of which are steeped in fundamental debates about definitions of terms, methods of inquiry, the nature of assumptions and inferences, and the porous boundaries separating values and evidence. Take any of the major education questions we study—the achievement gap, the nature of human learning and cognition, the role of teachers and teaching, noncognitive outcomes of education, the social organization of schools, effects of poverty on educational opportunity, uses and misuses of educational tests, the future of technology for instruction and assessment, and the sociocultural aspects of teaching and learning, to name a few—and it’s no wonder that when I’m asked if I work in the “hard sciences,” I typically say, “No, the very hard sciences.”

It is perhaps obvious that the most interesting and complex problems of education cannot be handled easily or adequately by any single scholarly tradition or methodological apparatus. It takes an intellectual village. Consider the achievement gap, surely one of the most persistently frustrating characteristics of an education system that strives for equality in opportunity, if not in outcome. “Talking amongst themselves” (to borrow from the famous Saturday Night Live routine), economists or psychologists or sociologists or political scientists often produce interesting and important insights about specific aspects of the achievement gap. But real progress in understanding the problem, not to mention devising potentially helpful reform strategies and evaluating their results, requires a joining of intellectual forces, a willingness to look at data through multiple lenses, and a capacity for mutually respectful and supportive discourse across conventional disciplinary lines.

All that may sound intuitively appealing, but crossing disciplinary divides and producing useful and high-quality integrative knowledge is no cakewalk. Under what conditions can scholars trained in the rigors of their respective disciplines communicate effectively with peers from other disciplines? With incentives for academic advancement so firmly rooted in disciplinary norms of research, how can broader strategies of scholarship be encouraged and assessed? If education research is truly interdisciplinary, or at least multidisciplinary, how can we promote continued excellence in the component disciplines while at the same time striving for synergies in knowledge production? These are tough questions, maybe even as tough as measuring the size of our universe, and they were at least in part what motivated our theme for this year’s AERA Annual Meeting: “Disciplined Inquiry: Education Research in the Circle of Knowledge.”

The Annual Meeting in San Diego will be the beginning of what we hope is an ongoing experiment. Our working hypothesis is that education research benefits from—and also contributes significantly to—disciplinary scholarship. As President Lorraine McDonnell and I noted in the call for papers, “The disciplines have contributed a diverse array of theoretical insights and research methods to the study of education and its societal roles. Education research, in turn, has provided a major venue for testing theories and developing analytical methods, and its studies have helped refine and expand those theories in significant ways. More than multidisciplinary endeavors in many other fields, education research has been inclusive in its application of disciplinary perspectives and in its respect for quantitative and qualitative methods. . . . The 2009 Annual Meeting will be an opportunity for renewed discussion and expansion of the role of education research as a hub of interdisciplinary scholarship.”

Our approach to testing the hypothesis...
that interdisciplinarity is both necessary and feasible is to try it out. We do not claim to have a well-honed theory that can establish connections across disciplinary styles of inquiry; rather we come at the problem more in the spirit of “learning by doing.” Thanks to the incredibly hard work of our Program Committee and the very fine responses of so many members, we have hundreds of sessions in the Annual Meeting program in which scholars of varied methodological and scientific perspectives will discuss their work and explore how new linkages might contribute fresh and useful knowledge. We hope that participants will come away with new insights and positive feelings about how education research is a product of—and a producer of—cross-disciplinary knowledge. I am confident we will hear from participants about how successful the experiment was.

I would like to call to your attention a number of Presidential Sessions that exemplify the conference theme. Many of these sessions bring together scholars who share interests but who use divergent methods and modes of inquiry. We have organized these sessions into clusters, in hopes of providing both intellectual and logistical efficiencies.

For example, for the cluster called Explorations of Cognition, we have invited Nobel Prize–winning economist James Heckman to talk about his research on schools, skills, and cognition, and have asked the cognitive neuroscientist Philip Zelazo to be the discussant. The flip of that model is a session organized by Yoav Cohen (psychology and measurement), in which the distinguished neuroscientist Michael Posner will describe new research on human learning, with discussant remarks provided by the economist Jens Ludvig. The AERA Distinguished Lecture will be given by the renowned sociologist and demographer Robert Hauser, on the topic of cognitive development and its (sometimes surprising) consequences and nonconsequences over the life course.

Similarly, in the Interdisciplinary Dialogues cluster, which focuses on quantitative and qualitative inquiry, we have a symposium organized by the distinguished scholar of language, literacy, and qualitative inquiry Elizabeth St. Pierre, with anthropologist of education Judith Preissle, philosopher Thomas Schwanzt, education sociologist Annette Hemmings, culture studies expert Handel Wright, and education historian Ronald Butchart. Another symposium, organized by Pamela Moss (educational measurement) and Denis Phillips (philosophy and education), includes Frederick Erickson (education and anthropology), Robert Foden (education and philosophy), Patti Lather (curriculum and instruction), and Barbara Schneider (education and sociology), scholars whose diverse intellectual traditions will surely stimulate a lively interaction.

A third example of our effort to build interdisciplinary dialogue is the cluster Assessment and Accountability From Pre-K to the University. One session, organized by Avital Darmon (biology and education) of the Initiative for Applied Education Research in Israel and Susan Van Hemel (psychology and human factors) of the National Research Council, will bring together Catherine Snow (educational psychology and linguistics), Fadia Nasser-Abu Alhija (measurement and evaluation methods), and Kenji Hakuta (educational psychology, language, and statistics). This session promises to explore our capacity as education researchers for building bridges not just across disciplines but across continents and ethnicities. Another session, organized by Stuart Elliott (economics and cognitive science) and Judith Koenig (educational measurement), will facilitate a rich dialogue among Douglas Harris (economics and education), Daniel Koretz (educational psychology and assessment), Henry Braun (statistics and measurement), Brian Stecher (education and assessment), Diana Pullin (education and law), and Judith Rizzo (education policy and prac-
tice). Richard Atkinson, president emeritus of the University of California and a psychological scientist of world renown, will give a Presidential Invited Address on the future of the SAT, with former AERA President and preeminent scholar of educational assessment Robert Linn acting as discussant.

Yet another example of how education research connects with disciplines—even beyond the behavioral and social sciences—is the cluster Research-Based Innovations in STEM Education. One session is organized and chaired by the distinguished particle physicist Helen Quinn and includes Jonathan Osborne (science education), Valerie Otero (physics education), and Carlo Parravano (chemistry and education). A second session in this cluster is organized by Janice Earle (education research and policy) and Joan Ferrini-Mundy (mathematics education), and includes Cora Marrett (sociology and education) and Karen Marrongelle (mathematics and education).

These are just four examples of session clusters. I encourage you to scan the complete list (below), and to then check the program and make sure to block your schedules accordingly.

Let me use this space to highlight two other very special sessions. First, in conjunction with the Decade of Behavior, for which AERA is one of the endorsing societies, we will be honored to hear a major address by Michael Gazzaniga, Professor of Psychology and Director of the SAGE Center for the Study of Mind at the University of California, Santa Barbara (see Explorations of Cognition cluster). Second, we are delighted that former AERA President Lauren Resnick will deliver the annual Wallace Foundation Distinguished Lecture, in which she will highlight the subtle connections between education research and practice (see Education Research in a Changing Political World cluster). These special lectures will contribute invaluable insights and further bolster the concept of cross-disciplinary education research.

Finally, I want to very strongly urge you to attend Lorraine McDonnell’s Presidential Address, “Repositioning Politics in Education’s Circle of Knowledge,” on Wednesday afternoon (April 15), which promises to be an especially creative and rigorous treatment of key issues tied to the conference theme.

Lorraine and I very much look forward to greeting you in San Diego and to what we expect will be a rewarding and memorable Annual Meeting.

—Michael J. Feuer

2009 Program Chair