by Flavia Piazza

Fostering Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Business Education: Insper's Example

Introduction

Interdisciplinarity is a constant topic of discussion in business schools. Because their role involves connecting with companies — ensuring employability for students and access to data for research — the broader ecosystem that includes business, government, and society is crucial to sustain their mission.

However, building and maintaining such an ecosystem is complex. Its sustainability depends on the principle that every stakeholder can — and should — benefit from the connections created. Achieving this balance requires deliberate efforts, long-term commitment, and strategic collaboration among many actors.

Looking at its classrooms, research initiatives, corporate partnerships, and community engagement, we find numerous examples of how this approach unfolds in practice — within the financial and business centre of Latin America's largest economy.

Insper, a non-profit institution dedicated to teaching and research in São Paulo, Brazil, has developed its activities with this balanced and sustainable mindset. Through initiatives aligned with the interests of both internal and external stakeholders, the institution has built a culture that integrates diverse areas of knowledge while contributing to business and society. Looking at its classrooms, research initiatives, corporate partnerships, and community engagement, we find numerous examples of how this approach unfolds in practice — within the financial and business centre of Latin America's largest economy.

In the Classroom

Classrooms are where interdisciplinarity becomes tangible. Graduates will need to collaborate with professionals from diverse fields, so universities must create opportunities for students to experience this during their studies. Formal academic activities that mix students from different programmes are particularly powerful, as they allow future lawyers, engineers, designers, and managers to learn by solving problems together.

At Insper, interdisciplinarity is seen as a foundation for developing problem-solvers capable of working across boundaries. The curriculum itself is structured to promote connections between disciplines from the very beginning. For example, students from business administration and economics study together during the first three semesters, sharing courses and classrooms. They engage with economic reasoning to understand how systems, incentives, and policies interact. This shared foundation fosters a common language across programmes and encourages analytical dialogue among different fields.

Moreover, electives in the final semesters are open to all undergraduate programmes, ensuring that students from business, law, economics, computer science, and engineering share the same classroom. In addition, more than 40 student clubs, organised by interest rather than programme, provide further opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. One club, for example, is developing an electric aircraft: engineering students design the wings, computer science students build the systems, and business administration students coordinate the project and budget. These experiences serve as small laboratories of interdisciplinarity, where students apply their skills collaboratively in real projects.

Interdisciplinary learning also extends to executive education. The Advanced Programme in Digital Transformation prepares experienced professionals to lead digital change in their organisations. Its curriculum integrates theoretical foundations with practical application through a capstone project that challenges participants to solve a real problem faced by a partner company. Working in studio-style sessions, teams prototype and test innovative solutions, practising critical thinking, design skills, and collaborative communication. Projects are evaluated by panels including both internal and external experts, reinforcing the programme's bridge between academia and practice.

In Research

In research, interdisciplinarity takes on a different form: it is less visible than in classrooms, but no less transformative. At Insper, collaboration often begins with a question that cannot be answered from a single discipline — how to measure social impact, how to strengthen democracy, or how to design better cities. From these shared questions, networks of researchers emerge, crossing the lines that traditionally separate departments.

This collaborative spirit is embedded in Insper's Knowledge Centers, which gather faculty from management, economics, law, public policy, and engineering to address complex societal challenges. Rather than working in isolation, researchers co-create studies, policy papers, and frameworks that serve both academic and practical purposes.

Insper Metricis, a research cell within the Center for Public Management & Policy (CGPP), develops tools to measure social and environmental impact. One of its most

40
STUDENT CLUBS

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recognised outcomes is the *Guide for Socio-Environmental Impact Assessment* — a framework designed in collaboration with organisations seeking to understand the real effects of their investments. The guide has become a reference for companies and institutions that wish to evaluate their social performance beyond financial metrics.

The CRD (Centre for Regulation and Democracy), in turn, brings together lawyers, economists, and political scientists to analyse how democratic institutions function in practice. Through its annual reports and policy papers, the centre contributes to public debate on governance and regulatory quality in Brazil. Its work demonstrates how academic inquiry can strengthen civic institutions and inform better public policies.

Meanwhile, the Center for City Research and the Center for Business Studies centres connect researchers who investigate urban and business challenges in an increasingly complex world — from mobility and urban governance to technological transformation and innovation management. By fostering dialogue between the public and private sectors, they help translate research into solutions that shape everyday life.

Beyond formal structures, interdisciplinarity also thrives in the informal corridors of research. At Insper, professors from different departments share offices, coffee breaks, and ideas. It is often in these spontaneous exchanges that the next collaborative paper, data project, or experiment begins. Together, these formal and informal spaces illustrate how research at Insper is built on curiosity, dialogue, and a shared purpose: to generate knowledge that matters.

With Partners

Universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their relevance to society. Employers, governments, and NGOs expect them to contribute not only to talent development but also to solving complex challenges. Interdisciplinary approaches are what make these collaborations effective, as they combine diverse perspectives into innovative and practical outcomes.

At Insper, this connection with external partners is structured and intentional. The Career Centre and internship programmes serve as first points of contact with employers, but the collaboration extends far beyond. A key example is the Capstone Project, mandatory for all undergraduate programmes. Companies of different sizes and industries bring real challenges and datasets to the classroom. Under faculty supervision, multidisciplinary student teams design and test solutions, reinforcing teamwork, applied research, and readiness for professional life.

Some projects evolve into research partnerships. A recent study by Insper's Centre for Business Studies, supported by Robert Half, collected and analysed data on leadership development. The results generated an executive report and an academic publication exploring how worries about leadership help explain why many professionals are reluctant to pursue leadership positions.

Interdisciplinary collaboration also underpins Insper's innovation ecosystem. The school hosts the Tata Consultancy Services Pace Port, the first in Latin America — an innovation lab that unites students, professors, and companies to develop projects using artificial intelligence, IoT, blockchain, and automation. The lab accelerates experimentation and co-creation between academia and industry, reflecting how business schools can lead open innovation in partnership with the private sector.

In Society and the Community

Interdisciplinarity at Insper goes beyond academic programmes and research agendas. It is also a way of shaping how the university relates to its environment — the city, the community, and the citizens it helps to form. In this broader dimension, interdisciplinarity becomes less about connecting disciplines and more about connecting worlds: academia and everyday life, knowledge and practice, individuals and the collective good.

This perspective reflects Insper's belief that universities have a responsibility not only to educate skilled professionals but also to cultivate engaged citizens who understand the interdependence between organisations, communities, and urban life. By linking education, research, and civic engagement, the institution aims to contribute to a more sustainable, inclusive, and collaborative society.

At Insper in São Paulo, this reflection guided the planning of a new campus building. The institution partnered with the São Paulo city government to transform a street between its buildings into a pedestrian area with new green spaces and public areas. Car access to smaller streets around campus is being reduced to improve walkability and wellbeing for the local community. This initiative demonstrates how universities can leverage interdisciplinary expertise — combining urban design, economics, and public policy — to act as catalysts for positive urban transformation.

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Beyond its own campus, Insper has also been involved in projects that connect culture, education, and the city's public spaces. One recent example is the initiative developed at the free span of the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) — one of the city's most iconic cultural landmarks. From an academic perspective, this project encouraged learning through a transdisciplinary and collaborative methodology, engaging students in rethinking the democratic use of public areas in the metropolis.

As part of this effort, a *placemaking* action installed 150 beach chairs in the MASP plaza, inviting citizens to occupy and enjoy the open space in new ways. The initiative aimed to promote social interaction and reflect on how urban environments can foster inclusion, leisure, and civic engagement.

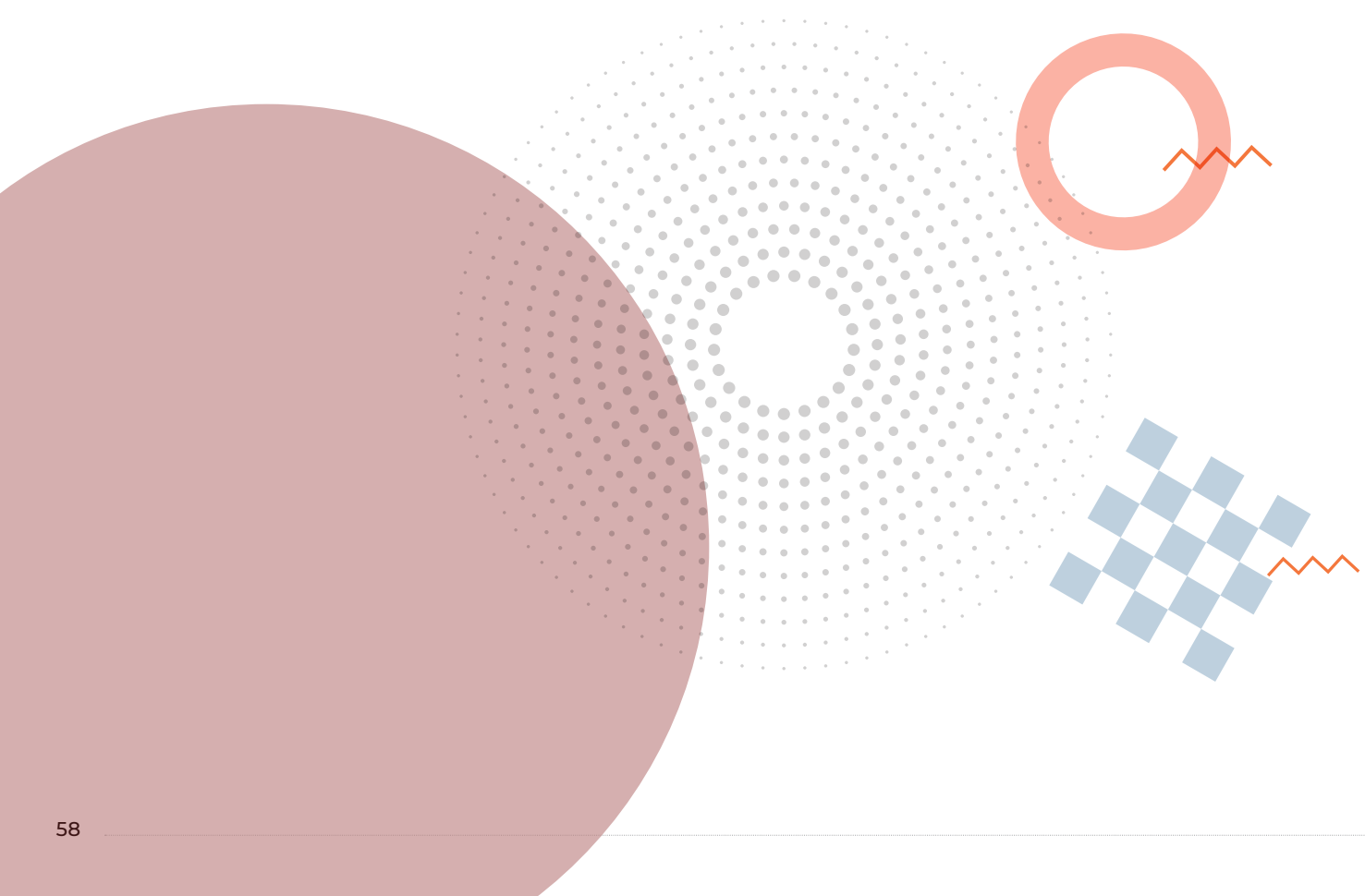
Together, these projects reflect Insper's understanding that universities are integral parts of the societies they inhabit — bridging design, policy, social science, and community activation to create sustainable and vibrant urban ecosystems.

Conclusion

Interdisciplinarity is no longer optional. It is essential for business schools that aim to educate relevant professionals, create meaningful research, and serve their communities.

At Insper, interdisciplinarity lies at the core of its mission. By connecting programmes, fostering collaboration among faculty, and building bridges with companies, governments, and communities, the institution has developed a model that prepares students to navigate complexity and create meaningful impact.

This experience shows that interdisciplinarity is not an abstract aspiration but a practical pathway to innovation and societal progress. When universities design systems that promote dialogue across disciplines, they generate more than a win–win — they build an ecosystem of shared value: a win for students, a win for institutions, a win for partners, and a win for society as a whole.



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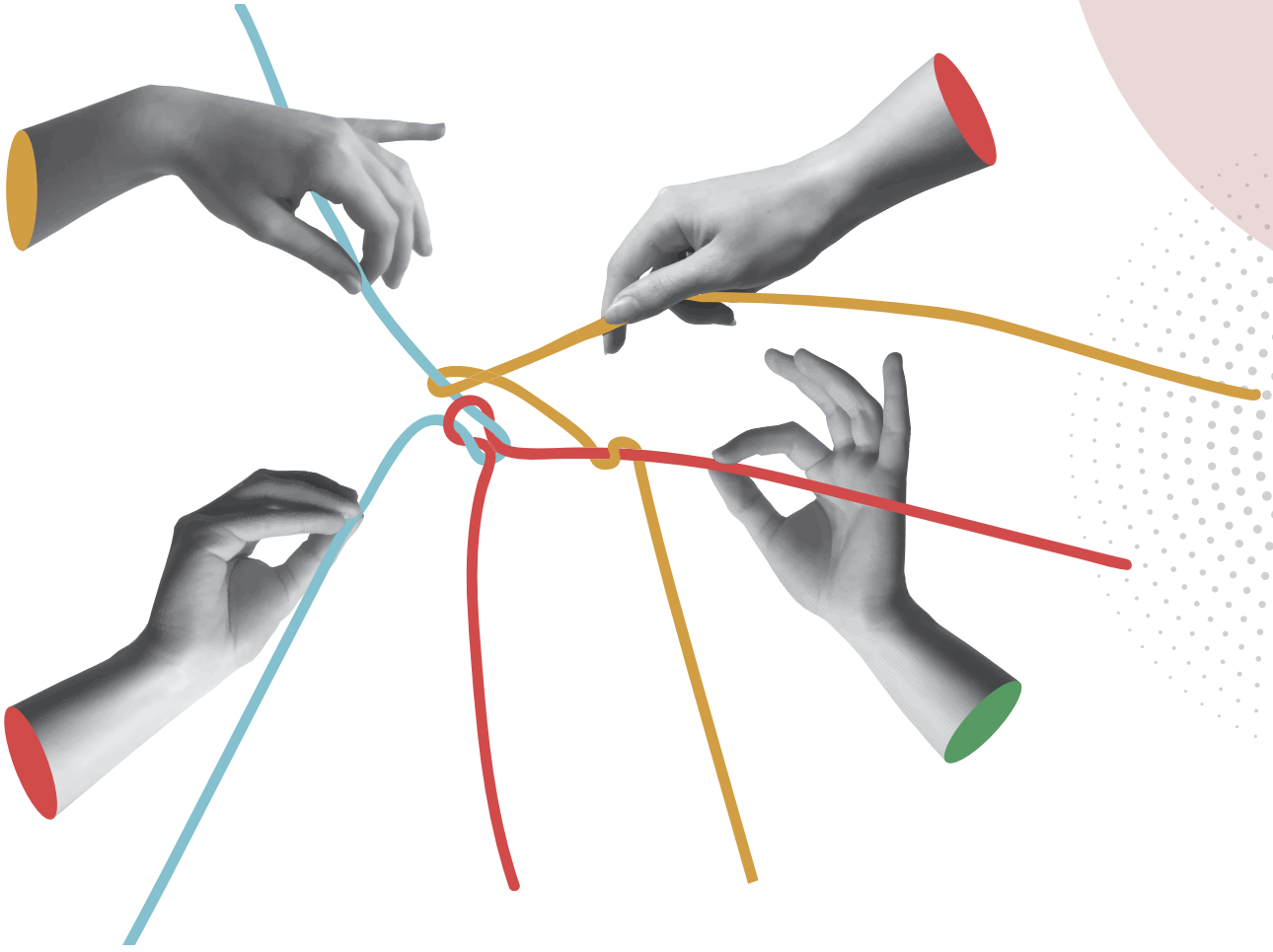
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