Of all the difficult decisions one confronts as an undergraduate, the selection of concentration is perhaps the hardest. Fortunately, it is also a choice I’ve never actually had to make.

Well, sort of: It’s true that pesky administrators and peskier bureaucratic documents frequently demand that I declare a field of study. But I reveled in indecision my freshman year: scrabbling “UNDECIDED” in big, bold letters whenever prompted for my concentration; dismissing with bravado such phrases as “coherent course of study” and “academic plan.” I was an incorrigible flirt at concentration fairs; I was at once a devoted economist, historian, and physicist when applying to popular seminars that gave preference to concentrators; I was a bona-fide, multihued chameleon when it came time to write my summer fellowship applications.

To my delight, I found that I could extend this limbo well past the end of first year. When I was officially forced to choose, I drifted from physics to philosophy, then to English, before spending an enjoyable sophomore fall semester in social studies. I spent a glorious two months my sophomore spring “between concentrations,” feverishly adding and dropping classes far beyond the already generous deadline until my study card somehow emerged: four courses in the pure sciences and a fifth in the history of science. For one reason or another, I had ended up in high science mode, and before the semester was through I became a chemical and physical biology concentrator.

Only after I decided on my final concentration did I realize how easy Harvard has recently made things for students with a surfeit of interest in everything—in short, for the chronically indecisive. Core curriculum and introductory courses are being rewritten with an eye to integration over specialization; cross-departmental research initiatives are bringing together faculty—and, with them, undergraduates—from across the University; study-abroad opportunities now meld basic science with social science, anthropology, and cultural studies. There is a world of interdisciplinary work here, one that I have spent two years approximating by jumping from concentration to concentration.

“We’re addicted to connections,” says Robert Lue, professor of the practice of molecular and cellular biology and director of the undergraduate Life Sciences Education program, before rattling off his list of favorite cross-departmental collaborations and initiatives. “And because of that...Harvard is one of the most forward-looking [institutions] in terms of interdisciplinary work—not just in the sciences, but in the humanities and social sciences as well.”

But historically, Harvard was not the best of schools for the “concentration-challenged.” Interdepartmental mobility was never a true priority at an institution famous for the hyperspecialization of its faculty members and the autonomy of its departments.
“When I started here as a graduate student,” says Everett Mendelsohn, research professor of the history of science, who joined the faculty in 1960, “there was one department of biology [that] encompassed everything from biochemistry and biophysics to zoology, botany, and systematics. In the last 30 or 40 years, there’s just been a proliferation of fields, in particular a proliferation of a variety of biologies.” At the height of the molecular revolution following the groundbreaking work on the structure of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick, the “traditional” biology of taxonomy, ecology, and systematics found its supremacy challenged by molecular biology. Watson, the titular leader of the molecularists, dismissed the traditionalists as “the stamp collectors of fauna and flora,” recalls Mendelsohn, while Ernst Mayr, traditional biology embodied, said the molecular biologists were simply “practitioners of the ‘natural history of the molecule.’”

As biology fragmented along molecular, cellular, developmental, and organismic lines, chemistry charted its own course. Meanwhile, throughout the humanities and social sciences, a score of other emerging disciplines saw themselves—and themselves alone—as properly equipped to confront their chosen intellectual challenges.

The last decades of the twentieth century were a time of regrouping, at the very least—of redrawing the disciplinary boundary lines that separated distinct intellectual foci and methodologies from one another. In many ways, particularly in terms of funding and research, such a move toward disciplinary autonomy made sense. “Intellectual focus and methodology were certainly the reasons for some of these regroupings,” says Mendelsohn, “but professors also wanted their own recognition.” Senseless or not, the fission-like process that fragmented biology continued unabated through the University, and before too long, boundary lines became departmental walls.

Fortunately for students like me, those walls are now being torn down. The recent overhaul of the undergraduate life sciences curriculum, an effort that Lue spearheaded, is emblematic of deeper educational undertows. The introductory course sequence alone, now in its third reincarnation and expanding every year, draws together five departments: molecular and cellular biology, chemistry and chemical biology, organismic and evolutionary biology, biological anthropology, and psychology. Says Lue, “It is, by far, the broadest interdisciplinary introduction to science of any freshman college curriculum.”

What began at the introductory level is snowballing into revised upper-level classes. “Students will increasingly learn science of a piece,” Lue proclaims, with visible excitement, and courses such as Life Sciences 60: “Ethics, Biotechnology, and the Future of Human Nature”—long the sole bridge, in its various guises over the years, between the sciences and the social sciences—will, if Lue has anything to do with it, become commonplace.

This internal evolution of the life sciences program, coupled with its increasingly cordial relationship with the social sciences, has facilitated my own interdisciplinary movement. The new chemical and physical biology concentration has encouraged me to plan a course of study tying together three or four different departments, while my work in a genetics lab during my sophomore spring and summer brought in half a dozen more. While the day-to-day protocols of microbiology weren’t necessarily the most exhilarating of scientific tasks, some of the most intellectually exciting moments of my time in lab arose from contemplating and discussing the philosophical, political, and social implications of the work going on around me. A well-timed history of science seminar on the Darwinian revolution furthered this trend, introducing me to the rich history of the interplay among sociology, philosophy, and pure science.

I’m not alone in my desire for cross-departmental work. Alexander Fabry ’09 was a committed physics concentrator before switching to history of science midway through his sophomore year. “To a large extent,” he says, “the largest impact of my concentration change is the broadened scope it allows, [which] really manifests itself in the interdisciplinary courses offered....I suppose like many intellectual endeavors, the benefit and excitement comes not from the scrutiny of one small corner of the world, but from using your discipline as a gateway to all branches of knowledge. In a funny way, I think that Harvard and the character of Harvard students are particularly suited to this.”

Clearly, I’m not the only one with a stack of “Change of Concentration” forms on my desk, along with a year’s supply of “Add-Drop” forms and my dog-eared course catalog. According to data provided by the registrar, for classes sampled in recent decades, 29 percent to 34 percent of students switched their declared concentration at least once in their College years.

Perhaps it’s because of these numbers that the class of 2010 and their successors now have until the middle of sophomore year to declare a concentration—a welcome procedural change, but one that is far less important to indecisive undergraduates (and faculty members, for that matter) than the reassessment of the lines dividing departments and disciplines. I can’t imagine that deciding one’s concentration will ever be completely painless, but making such a decision is a lot easier at a school “addicted to connections,” where movement between fields is valued almost as much as specialization in a single field.

Reducing Harvard’s interdisciplinary programs to mere havens for indecisive students would be foolishly simplistic: such programs (history and literature and social studies the most institutionalized among them) often benefit most those students with a clear idea of what they want to do. And there are, as ever, students able and willing to devote themselves to a single minute area of study, a fact Fabry illustrates by pointing to the early-twentieth-century Cambridge University mathematician G.H. Hardy, who “defended his field of study for the very reason that it—at least his branch of it—was so esoteric as to be of no interest or use to anyone not familiar with advanced number theory.”

But for students like me, the benefits of an interdisciplinary institution are clear. Fabry speculates that “the advances in knowledge, the most interesting intellectual work, and the deepest paradigm shifts often arise from interdisciplinary cross-pollination.” Through its evolving concentrations, course offerings, and research opportunities, Harvard is increasingly acknowledging that some of the
It’s now 104 years old, but after a three-stage, $5-million makeover, Harvard Stadium may be one of the nation’s best-equipped college football venues. First came synthetic turf, rolled out before the 2006 season. After the season came a removable protective bubble, allowing year-round use of the playing field. Then came floodlights.

After 651 home games at the Stadium—under a wide variety of atmospheric conditions, but always with natural light—Harvard played at night for the first time on September 22. Saturday night lights seemed to have a photo-voltaic effect on the Crimson grid-ders, who defeated an equally charged-up Brown squad, 24-17, in the Ivy League opener for both teams. A loud crowd of 18,898, with a larger-than-normal cadre of students, shared in the nocturnal excitation. Not since October 1993 has a home game against a team other than Yale lured so many spectators.

Randolph uncorked a 40-yard touchdown pass to pull out a win with just 19 seconds to play. The Crimson defense—which yielded 492 yards in total offense and three scoring passes to Holy Cross—still looked porous in the first half of the Brown game, but then regrouped and helped lock up the victory with three drive-breaking interceptions and three quarterback sacks.

The passing game shapes up as the offense’s long suit. Senior quarterback Liam O’Hagan, who had a fine sophomore season but struggled last year, was back in form at Holy Cross. He completed 19 of 30 passes for 264 yards and two touchdowns, ran for 65 yards and another score, was not intercepted, and got sacked only once. “I thought he made great decisions,” said head coach Tim Murphy after the game. “In terms of field generalship, this was arguably the best game he’s played. To come out in our first game and have zero turnovers against a very good football team, I thought was a major accomplishment.”

In the Brown game O’Hagan directed an 80-yard scoring drive on Harvard’s first possession, throwing a 21-yard touchdown pass to all-Ivy receiver Corey Mazza ’07 (’08), and later a seven-yarder to Matt Luft ’10. Brown countered with two scoring passes of its own—one of them a dazzling 63-yard catch-and-run by mercurial receiver Paul Raymond—and took a 17-14 lead on kicker Steven Morgan’s second-period field goal. But a 40-yard kickoff return by junior cornerback Andrew Berry, promptly followed up by a 41-yard pass from O’Hagan to Mazza, brought Harvard right back. Shaking off two defenders, Mazza appeared to score for many squad members, Harvard’s first night game brought back the exhilaration of playing under lights in high school. “This is our star treatment,” said one. “This is a treat, it’s a blessing.”