

Year 3 Report for the Interdisciplinary Studies Program (INDS)

SUMMARY: *In the time that has elapsed since the most recent (2011), full Academic Program Review (APR), the Interdisciplinary Studies program (INDS) has undergone an extraordinary degree of change. It has changed leadership, it has changed physical location on campus, it has relocated within the organizational structure of the university, it has undergone major staff turnover and consequently it has evolved every aspect of its programming and operations. The roots of these changes can be identified clearly within the action plan that resulted from the previous APR. It would be of limited use, however, to focus an interim report solely upon describing these changes and their cause. That information forms only a backdrop to the pattern of rich program growth emerging as INDS staff work steadily to optimize the opportunities brought by these changes. This evolution of the program reflects the vision that will carry INDS to the next APR. Our next challenges are to stabilize the work of two “adjuncts” (who function as core staff members); to solidify the culture of grant-based funding; and to collect assessment data (with an emphasis on student learning outcomes) that will inform the next APR. This report is divided into three sections: (1) A brief review of changes and their relationship to the previous APR; (2) A description of the growth that has resulted; and (3) A summary of the most important challenges that remain.*

1. Background and context from 2011 APR

One particular statement characterizes the (very positive) message of the most recent (2011) APR: “*The best low cost recommendation we can make is just ‘Tell the Story’*”. The program’s resulting action plan responded: “*We agree ... INDS will look for new ways to promote its students and to “tell the story” which was heard over and over again from the reviewers ... Support for a national search for a new director will be key to moving forward.*”

By June 2012, in response to the retirement of Director Patricia La Noue, UMBC had indeed initiated a national search for a new program director. The result was that Stephen Freeland began work as director in mid-June, 2013. As he arrived, two further, profound changes were already under discussion, influenced by, and impacting, the call for INDS to “tell its story” more effectively. The first of these major changes concerned the possible relocation of the program within the organizational structure of UMBC. With the arrival of the new director, these discussions concluded with INDS moving to report to Dr. Diane Lee as a unit within the Office of Undergraduate Education (since renamed to the Division of Undergraduate Academic Affairs). This move positioned INDS among a diverse group of intercollegiate units dedicated to the common goal of promoting student success within the UMBC community. The new identity brought a subtle but profound shift in strategic thinking for the INDS program, and opportunities for new partnerships.

By the time Dr. Freeland arrived, a second major change was to navigate an extensive, multi-year, renovation underway for the Fine Arts building in which INDS resides. The resulting need for INDS to relocate physically brought with it important, strategic questions. Within the first year of Dr. Freeland’s directorship, these discussions also concluded with a decision that INDS would relocate to the newly renovated ground floor of the Fine Arts building.

2. Program growth in response to the changes introduced since 2011 APR

Change in leadership has joined with physical and organizational relocation of INDS to stimulate significant evolution of the INDS program. During the first months of new leadership, INDS undertook a survey of its students and discovered that most of them knew few of their peers, or indeed program staff (beyond their specific advisor), until the final semester of their degree. Given the new identity of INDS within a division that emphasizes student retention and success, “community development” became a core theme (alongside themes of increased transparency and increased fiscal self-sufficiency). Together these themes have manifested in terms of curricular and co-curricular overhaul, a new focus on team-based applied learning, a change in strategy for gathering resources and renewed efforts to grow connections between INDS and other campus units.

2.1 Internal Development within the INDS Program

2.1a Evolution of the INDS Curriculum. Since the time of the last APR, the INDS program has introduced three new courses into its curriculum, each aiming to provide a positive impact on student retention and success. Each therefore exemplifies the new identity that comes with reporting to the Division for Undergraduate Academic Affairs.

- INDS232 (*Introduction to Food System Studies*) was introduced to pair with INDS430 (Section 1: *Creating Food Justice*). The idea of creating complementary course pairings that can provide a backbone for meaningful course clusters is also explored by offering other sections of INDS430 in Astrobiology (which complements PHYS107) and in the Anthropocene (which complements HCST100).
- INDS335 (*Degree Plan Writing Seminar*) formalizes the time and effort spent by students in planning their undergraduate degree. At present it is offered only to INDS majors, who are required to propose their own degree for evaluation by the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee. In addition to helping students to clarify the vision and content of their INDS degree, this new course is also proving valuable in helping some students to recognize early if another major would better suit their plans. The resulting use of INDS335 to help students plan a route through other degrees suggests a possible, valuable role for the course in serving non-INDS majors while meeting the spirit of UAA to foster student retention and success.
- INDS399 (*Guided Reading*) builds a bridge between each student’s degree plan (often written as a sophomore) and their capstone research project (executed as a senior). It creates a formal space in which to acquire a deeper understanding of their chosen area of study while developing their relationships with research mentors.

In addition to creating these new courses, INDS has made adjustments to its pre-existing curriculum. One notable theme running through these changes is a growing emphasis on applied learning (including coursework that uses the Garden at UMBC, has built a Kinetic Sculpture to race in the city-wide event this summer and, most recently, that creates an informational newsletter with which to publicize the achievements of INDS). Another strategic change has been to expand INDS330 to offer a summer session in order to start generating revenue with which to offset recent budget cuts while serving better the needs of our students.

2.1b Co-Curricular Evolution. During this same timeframe, INDS has evolved significantly the co-curricular opportunities that complement credit-based coursework. Foremost among these changes has been a major redesign of the INDS degree plan form with which students describe their ideas for a unique degree. The theme of this redesign was to emphasize the coherence of the degree and evidence for how it prepares the student for life after graduation.

Complementing this evolution of the degree plan form, INDS has instituted a rubric with which to describe the properties of a good proposal. This rubric is used by students in their preparation of a degree plan, and by members of the ISC in their evaluation of these proposals. Together, the form and rubric bring greater transparency and consistency to the standards of the program. In a similar vein, INDS is also formalizing proposal forms/rubrics for student applications for research and travel support, and for prizes offered through the program. A new prize, the La Noue Scholarship, has been added to celebrate the directorship of Patricia La Noue by sending one exceptional student each year to the national conference of the Association of Interdisciplinary Studies (AIS). Recipients of this prize are required to present at the conference, which contributes significantly to overall efforts to “tell our story.” We are delighted to report that UMBC has been asked to host the AIS conference in 2017.

In a different direction, INDS launched a new Living Learning Community (LLC) in 2014 as part of systematic efforts to build and strengthen community within INDS. This LLC also contributes toward building campus connections through partnerships with other LLC’s and the units they represent.

2.1c Evolution of the Program’s Financial Resources. Since the last APR, INDS has begun to shift culture towards greater fiscal self-sufficiency. In addition to initiating Summer/Winter programming, other efforts to generate new revenue include a direct initiative to increase donations. Gifts to the program have increased steadily over the past three years to reach unprecedented levels (FY2012 \$2,830; FY2013 \$3,705; FY2014, \$4,120). We have also secured a new scholarship from the Majid family, whose son and daughter both graduated with INDS degrees and whose son was named UMBC Valedictorian in 2013 . Meanwhile we have worked with the Office of Institutional Advancement to update and improve our annual appeal letter, as well as our web-presence for online donations. With this infrastructure in place, and the newsletter, we are now working to strengthen connections with our alumni that we may progress towards a major fundraising initiative as UMBC’s 50th anniversary celebrations approach.

Complementing all this, the program has begun to emphasize grant-writing as the way to support new programming initiatives. In order to start building this culture of grant proposals, we have so far targeted intramural opportunities. Within the past 18 months, these have met with extraordinary success: three BreakingGround grants, as well as a Hrabowski Innovation Award, an Entrepreneurship Development Grant and a Hybrid Course Development Grant. More intramural applications currently await evaluation. Coupled to the increased donations mentioned above, FY2014 was the first year in which funds raised by INDS exceeded those provided by the Provost’s operating budget.

2.2 External Development

2.2a Telling Our Story: Underpinning these initiatives to better “tell our story”, we have also taken simple steps to improve directly the program’s visibility. First and foremost, we picked a destination for our relocation that brings us “accidental foot traffic.” Our previous location (on the fifth floor of the Fine Arts Building) offered limited opportunities to tell our story to casual bypassers. Now with a large, shared (RT controlled) classroom on each side of our offices, we have begun to use multiple, large bulletin boards to communicate our existence and our work. We are excited to see non-INDS majors pause to browse degree plans, student stories or examples of research projects. Complementing this use of physical space, we have completely overhauled our digital footprint. We have migrated our web-site into sites@umbc, providing us far greater ease of editing (and therefore a more vibrant web presence). We have also begun to experiment with social media including a Facebook page, which is emerging as a particularly useful tool for maintaining connections with recent alumni.

2.2b Collaborations and connections with other campus units: Since the last APR, INDS has been building connections with a wide variety of other units on campus. In collaboration with the Honors College and the Shriver Center, we have entered into a multi-year project to study the influence of Applied Learning Experiences upon student success. We have expanded membership of the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee to include professional staff. We have initiated a collaboration with the Career Services Center to offer a 1-credit class that teaches students how to find and succeed in an appropriate internship. We are collaborating with the English department to extend a visiting professorship in return for help with student writing. We are collaborating with the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture (CADVC) to incorporate their major 2015 exhibition (“About Academia”) into our curriculum. We have used grants obtained this past year to employ suitably skilled graduate students from the Language and Literacy Culture Program to help us assess our introduction of curriculum reforms.

2.2C Building connections through service to the UMBC community. Given the degree of change experienced by the INDS program, service work to campus has been modest within the past 3 years. Director Freeland has served on the Provost’s Interdisciplinary Task Force and, since the end of this committee, has joined the planning advisory committee for the Interdisciplinary Life Sciences building (Spring 2014 - Spring 2016). Assistant Director Sauter continues to play a prominent role within the professional staff senate, and Eric Brown routinely volunteers for the New Student Book Experience Committee.

2.2D Navigating tenure within the department of biological sciences. A final element of new leadership is that director Freeland is both the 12-month director of INDS and tenured in the Department of Biological Sciences. The desire to play an appropriate, positive role within that department is accentuated by the fact that biology continues to face enormous enrollment pressures which stretch their resources. During his first two years as director, Freeland’s service has grown from presentations (guest lectures in various courses, at the undergraduate research day and a departmental research seminar) to serving on a (successful) job search committee and co-teaching the 1-credit course BIOL499L.

3. Challenges moving forwards

Throughout a period of extraordinary change, the INDS program has maintained health and stability. Steady numbers of undergraduate degree proposals are flowing through the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee each month, and student enrollment has remained more-or-less constant (125 +/- 10) since the time of the last APR. Given this, and all that is written above, the major challenges that we perceive moving forwards may be grouped usefully into those which the program itself can tackle, and those for which help is needed:

Challenges for the INDS program to address (in order of priority):

- (1) Programmatically, as noted in the previous APR, it is becoming ever harder to secure two faculty mentors for each INDS student. This is an obstacle to further program growth. The previous APR asked for help from within UMBC's administration to encourage greater faculty "buy-in." The simple truth, however, is that UMBC faculty are increasingly busy. Further program growth will require us to think deeply and creatively about this challenge.
- (2) Fiscally, the major challenge is to continue efforts to generate more of our own revenue. This means a continuation of the themes expressed in this report: (a) to shift from smaller, intramural grants to larger, external grants; (b) to build our winter/summer programming into revenue-generating course offering(s), and (c) to continue to develop connections with alumni that can provide an ever-stronger base of donations to the program.
- (3) Academically, our emphasis moving forwards to the next APR must be on assessment. With numerous initiatives underway, it is of paramount importance that we can understand and report their effects. Increased usage of the faculty development center, and the leaders in undergraduate program assessment to whom they guide us will provide another avenue by which to build connections with other campus units.

Challenges that will require external help (in order of priority)

- (1) A primary need is to stabilize the current team of INDS staff, whose complementarity of skills and personality is producing the powerful results outlined here. Jill Wrigley and Eric Brown act as primary advisor to ~20 INDS students each. In addition, Jill Wrigley (who brings with her JD from Columbia more than 2 decades of law practice and community activism) teaches INDS232 and 430, has pioneered applied learning within the program, is faculty mentor to the Garden at UMBC and has raised multiple grants. Eric Brown, a member of the first ever Meyerhoff cohort, has developed the new INDS degree plan and rubric, launched INDS335, worked continuously to improve the entire curriculum and also raised grants. Without job security, INDS risks losing them. Without them, the program would have to reduce significantly its activities and number of students served.
- (2) In moving to our current location, INDS lost its conference room. One year on, it is still not clear when a substitute (FA002) will become available. Given this, we are particularly dismayed to hear a rumour that the two RT-controlled classrooms on the ground floor of Fine Arts may be taken offline in AY 2015-16 for furniture storage. If this is true, then it would reduce to zero teaching space on the ground floor of Fine Arts and remove two newly renovated classrooms at a time of unprecedented classroom usage pressures. It would do much for morale if INDS were provided with adequate space to teach and meet.