

November 28, 2018

TO: Antonio Moreira, Vice Provost  
FROM: Katharine Cole, Vice Provost and Dean, Undergraduate Academic Affairs  
RE: Academic Program Review (APR), Individualized Study Program

I have carefully reviewed the Self-Study for the Academic Program Review for the Individualized Study Program and the report of the external reviewers. The Self-Study highlights the Department's rich history and numerous strengths as well as some areas that are currently challenging, as well as future directions for the program. The External Reviewers' Report affirms the strengths and the challenges of INDS detailed in the Self-Study, and offers well thought out recommendations. Both the Self-Study and external review are important documents that will assist INDS in its future development.

Summary:

Both the Self-Study and external review highlighted several areas in which INDS excels, some challenges and the program's future directions. The program's focus on the epistemology of knowledge coupled with the curricular innovations in the core courses and directed nature of the student inquiry were all areas that stood out to the reviewers, as well as the passion and expertise of the director and staff in INDS.

### **External Reviewers' Evaluation:**

The Reviewers offered extremely positive comments about INDS in a number of areas and also presented some challenges:

- **Overall:** The reviewers noted the positive impact of the new title, Individualized Study as it serves to identify the unique and specific qualities of the degree program. INDS is "well positioned" to contribute to undergraduate education at UMBC. The university is "fortunate to have such excellent faculty and staff dedicated to individual education."
- **The Curriculum:** As an Individual Major Program (IMP), "INDS employs more required coursework than most programs, but is in many ways ahead of the game." There is a rigorous degree plan approval process and a required capstone project that enhance the learning experience for majors.
- **Program Resources:** "The staff should be credited for making the current space friendly and inviting," however the reviewers noted major facilities limitations

The external reviewers discussed a number of subject areas and provided recommendations for future growth, program development, and improvement. The following is a summary of their observations and recommendations. My responses below are in *italics*.

- 1. Individualized Education:** The reviewers felt INDS had “value added” compared to other IMPs in the areas of interdisciplinarity, scaffolding of the core major’s courses, the direct nature of inquiry, the capstone project, and dedicated and passionate staff. .

*I strongly agree with their assessment. Under the current Director, the evolution of the program has been significant, and the focus on individual inquiry and the true nature how students integrate disparate disciplines and end up with a meaningful capstone experience has been profound.*

The reviewers believe that INDS is “is well positioned to meet student-led interest, or bottom-up initiatives, in interdisciplinarity, as opposed to faculty-driven, top-down approaches. In an environment where UMBC is restricted by state regulators in its ability to form new majors, INDS plays an important role by filling gaps where a standard major (e.g., criminology) cannot be offered at UMBC or by offering niche areas of study unaddressed by faculty-led or administratively defined interdisciplinary areas of study. INDS also represents important capacity for over-subscribed technical majors. As these majors send many students to other parts of the university because of fit issues, INDS can be an effective educational solution for students seeking to retain an intellectual tie to their initially chosen major or majors.”

*I strongly agree with this assessment. INDS already fills gaps where majors are restricted or not offered and is expanding in the pre-professional arena as a very viable alternative to the “traditional” majors for pre-law, and pre-health professions students. Additionally, INDS is participating with the computer science department in an NSF funded grant to meaningfully integrate data science and computer programming into some of the INDS student programs.*

The reviewers noted some lack of clarity about INDS’s niche within the myriad of UMBC majors, minors, and certificates and within the existing interdisciplinary majors. However, they felt the new name and recognition of the structural gaps left open by state regulatory degree constraints and existing interdisciplinary majors allows INDS to fill a quality niche in the UMBC ecosystem.

*I agree. INDS is unique in its ability to have the curricular flexibility to operate in an area distinct form of interdisciplinary degrees as the INDS degree generally integrates three or more, often very disparate disciplines, and serves to allow students the flexibility to choose how the disciplines should integrate rather than double majoring without any disciplinary integration.*

- 2. Curriculum:** The external team applauded the high quality of the INDS program and the five sequenced core courses with an additional one to be taken concurrently. The reviewers also praised the quality control of the degree proposals, the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee (ISC), and continual assessment of the core learning objectives. There was recognition and praise of a strong curricular design for individualized learning and in addressing the challenges of navigating multiple often very diverse disciplines. The reviewers recognized the value of the integrated experience gained by the capstone project.

It appeared to the reviewers that the curriculum and capstone were fairly extensive and they thought there might be an opportunity to streamline in these areas.

The reviewers discussed the ISC and how the current structure imposes burdens on faculty, staff, and students. They also indicated that voting once per semester on degree proposals and

having, at times, a small percentage approved may not be the best structure. Additionally, the reviewing team indicated that with this structure, there is a large amount of weight to committee members with no expertise in the disciplines in the degree plan. It was suggested that a more decentralized approach that ensures a high level of quality, but also affords more flexibility and efficiency in the degree approval process.

*I could not more strongly agree with the reviewer's assessment and have had first-hand experience with the challenges of the current ISC structure. I encourage the program director and staff to look at other institutions and their degree approval processes to determine if a more decentralized approach allowing for more expertise in the disciplines chosen by the student might lead to the development of a more effective structure.*

The student's perception of quality was noted by the reviewers and the reviewers reported the students had "great satisfaction with their relationships with program advisors and instructors, identifying the closeness of these relationships as something that differentiated INDS from other units on campus. Although we spoke with no students who, after taking an INDS class, decided not to major in the program, we have reason to believe this population also profited by its exposure to the initial INDS courses, in that they would have had occasion to reflect on the meaning of the University's degree structures, to identify the locations of various intellectual activities on campus, and, as a result, make an informed choice about their academic path, even when that path veered away from INDS."

The Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) were reviewed and the reviewers were very positive about the manner in which INDS has integrated SLOs with core course requirements across the curriculum utilizing direct (grades) and indirect (exit satisfaction interviews) outcome measurements. The reviewers suggested "closing the loop" by integrating the capstone projects and defenses into the program assessment of the SLOs.

### **3. Program Resources:**

**Facilities:** The current facilities were considered by the reviewers to be in need of improvement. It was stated that the stained carpet, faded linoleum and lack of adequate storage signaled "neglect and marginality" and would need to be addressed especially if there were plans to expand the program.

**Program growth:** The reviewers indicated there are multiple ways to grow the INDS program, both to majors and non-majors, but the system for approving degree plans, the faculty mentoring structure, and inadequate staff and facilities seemed to impose limits on the size of the program.

### **External Reviewers Recommendations:**

1. The rebranding of INDS is a marketing opportunity for UMBC that can increase the attractiveness of a major research university with relatively few majors.
2. Adopting an informal norm or formal rule mandating that individualized programs must draw on three majors minimally may decrease departments' misperceptions about INDS.
3. Relocation to more pleasant space adjacent to similar units, such as the Honors College, would have benefits for INDS students and staff, as well as the broader community.

4. INDS should look for ways to expand service to non-majors in some of the ways identified above.
5. Careful, gradual expansion of the number of majors should occur in consultation with administration since resources will need to accompany dramatic increases.
6. Minor changes to the processes of the program could increase efficiency (e.g., in the ISC approval process and the use of mentors).
7. Efforts by administration to help students negotiate pre-requisite courses that aren't necessary for the development of skills could speed student passage through the major.
8. Possible modifications of core INDS curriculum (allowing for simultaneous enrollment in some of the core courses) could accommodate transfer students while also improving time to degree of all majors.
9. To help support the work of mentors, modest compensation at the time of student completion might be considered.
10. Expansion of current e-portfolios could help students develop their individualized degree programs effectively.

*I am in support of all 10 recommendations in theory, however, I feel the program administration needs to be very judicious when considering the recommendation (#7) that suggests the administration help INDS students “negotiate” departmental pre-requisites that are not necessary for the development of skills for a particular INDS student.*

## **Conclusion**

The Individualized study Program is a unique bridge that connects disparate disciplines and enhances student development and learning through academic connections developed with the three colleges. INDS's progress since the last APR has been outstanding. The significant and positive changes in the integrated core curriculum, capstone projects, SLOs, faculty mentoring and perhaps most importantly student academic and personal development are exemplary. Through the passionate and tireless efforts of the director and his staff, they have developed an individualized degree program that effectively and innovatively integrates multiple, often quite disparate disciplines, into a coherent, well designed intellectual pursuit that culminates in an extraordinary individual educational experience and degree.

The Self-Study, the Reviewers' Report, and my report all indicate that INDS can and should expand its innovative approach to education, however, this would mean confronting several challenges. The first of which is mentioned in the reviewer's recommendations, and that is inadequacy of the current space and facilities. This is a major issue to expanding any of the INDS programmatic components to majors or non-majors.

The second is evaluating a potentially different structure for the ISC and faculty mentoring that utilizes and rewards faculty expertise and ensures high quality degree proposals while not impeding academic progress for the students.

Over the next several years, I look forward to working with the INDS team to address their challenges and to be a part of a process that allows more students to take advantage of the remarkable educational experience INDS offers.