

UGC Report on Individualized Study (INDS) Academic Program Review

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Introduction:

The INDS program at UMBC was founded in 1969 as an option for students to differentiate their degrees from the traditional 13 majors at the time. The major was created to “Afford highly motivated, intellectually mature students the opportunity to construct their own academic programs, with the hope that these students might better profit from the experience than from the traditional major programs. (INDS APR 2018, 5). As the number of traditional majors has grown at UMBC the INDS program has continued to serve students who are looking for a major not offered at UMBC. The department has also expanded its mission by working to assist students select degree options in other departments at UMBC.

The department reports declining enrollments in the program over the past six years. However, degrees awarded has remained constant. They project a steady state model for the foreseeable future of INDS in which all program activities are tailored to support 60 majors and approximately 20 non-majors at any given time using the current budget.

Student Learning Outcomes

INDS works with faculty and professional staff from across the UMBC campus to guide students through design and implementation of an individualized undergraduate education. Each degree combines elements from two or more existing academic programs and concludes with the planning and execution of a capstone research project. (INDS APR 2018, 8). The department offers a writing intensive core curriculum to augment the course work from other academic departments.

The department has two different focuses for accessing learning outcomes. First, there is an assessment of the effectiveness of relatively few courses the department offers. Second, overall learning outcomes for students majoring in the program are assessed. INDS has worked extensively with the faculty development center since the last APR to create an assessment plan that covers all stages of the degree completion cycle (14). Assessment was largely indirect but included significant elements of qualitative data with an emphasis on Narrative Aggregation - i.e. accounts provided by students and staff of their experiences within the program, synthesized into significant insights.

The second phase of their assessment plan shifted the emphasis from assessment within courses to the alignment and integration of courses. In so doing they were able to identify core concepts in the program. The program-level intended learning outcomes were identified as written communication, oral communication and critical thinking. This led to the development of

consistent rubrics for evaluating outcomes. They suggest that the most meaningful direct assessment is that the number of students graduating successfully is almost identical at the start and end of this APR cycle even though the number of degree proposals approved declined by 35% and the number of majors enrolled in the program declined by 25%. Since a majority of the coursework done by their students is offered by other departments, INDS relies on student reporting of their experiences beyond UMBC, such as preparedness for prestigious graduate study. The external reviewers noted that the capstone project serves as a viable program assessment even though the self-study did not cite it as such.

Program Modifications and Changes

The most significant change noted is the change of the programs name from Interdisciplinary Studies to Individualized Studies. This was in part due to UMBC's focus on interdisciplinary work throughout the curriculum. The external reviewers found this to be a positive change. Additionally, the program has also added new course offerings to help strengthen the development of student course proposals and capstone projects.

Curriculum

The INDS program offers students the opportunity to develop individualized plans for a B.A or B.S. Both degrees require the completion of 13 credits in the INDS core, plus at least 42 additional credits at the 200 level or above. For the B.S. 30 of those credits must be in math, science, engineering or technology. Fifteen of those 30 must be in the proposal and at the 300- and 400-level. The external reviewers noted that the program has more required coursework than most programs of this type. However, they also suggested that INDS's sequenced core courses offered an advantage over other similar programs.

The reviewers found the curriculum to be of high quality. However, they suggested that the current configuration imposed a heavy burden on faculty, staff and student time. This is due to the way degree programs are reviewed in a process they found similar to a research grant proposal review. They recognized that INDS is working on improving the approval process.

Undergraduate Research

Undergraduate research is promoted through the use of the required capstone project. In addition, the self-study offers a number of examples of both student participation in faculty research and student led research projects. The very nature of the program implies a high degree of participation in research.

Advisement

INDS uses a multi-pronged approach to advising. The goal of INDS advising is to help students discover the path through the university that best prepares them for their desired careers or graduate school, whether or not this ends up being the INDS degree. A student's choice to remain in this program or transition to another is now formalized by multiple checkpoints within the curriculum (2). Students who express interest in the program move on to an in-person appointment unless initial screening makes it clear that they should be referred to another program. That meeting results in a referral to another program unless the student demonstrates a good fit for the individualized degree process, in which case they are assigned to a member of INDS core staff as their primary advisor. (36) The primary advisor meets regularly with their students, including clearing the student to register for classes each semester, providing any permissions to enroll in INDS courses, and reviewing graduation requirements. In addition, the advisor explores, in depth, the student's motivations and postgraduation goals. INDS advisors regularly attend training and work with the orientation team to help incoming students.

INDS's advising model has evolved into a team-based approach effort. Students now meet with other program staff at multiple points in the program. In addition to the advising provided within the program, INDS majors identify two degree mentors representing the two most significant, different disciplines represented in their degree plan. These mentors meet individually with the student and participate in stakeholder team meetings. These faculty mentors provide discipline-specific advising on the content matter from their affiliated department. (36)

The external reviewers complemented the well planned approach and effort that the INDS staff used to advise students. However, they seemed to be concerned about the high number of students seeking individualized study that ended up being redirected to existing majors. The reviewers noted a lack of clarity about the INDS's place in UMBC's overall program of majors, minors and certificates. They found that INDS was well positioned to fill a gap in programs created by Maryland regulation that otherwise might only be possible by double majoring. This does not seem practical as the reviewers found that INDS students drew coursework from a minimum of three majors and up to as many as 9 majors.

Faculty Mentor Development

Because INDS mostly relies on other departments to provide courses they do not have any faculty lines of their own. The director is the only member of faculty in the department and his faculty line is in the department of biology. The remaining members of the department hold staff appointments. Faculty mentors are drawn from across the campus community. INDS has made a conscious effort to expand and formalize the extent to which all INDS students are required to seek input from their faculty mentors. The report notes improvements in the overall quality of successful degree completion, including capstone research projects. Less clear is the extent to which these changes have led to greater satisfaction with the program on the part of faculty

mentors. (33) Faculty mentors have expressed the opinion that they do not feel clear or empowered in their role with INDS students. In addition, the INDS staff has noted that some faculty mentors seem confused about elements of students' degrees. The program has worked to understand and mitigate such problems, but believes that it remains an important task for the near future to explore systematically the extent and nature of such problems and how faculty mentors might best be brought to greater confidence and clarity without burdening them in their voluntary activity. This is perhaps an area where INDS could use a more formalized approach.

Additional Comments:

The external reviewers were very complementary of the program. They believed the program was in some ways ahead of similar programs at other institutions. However, the reviewers as well as the self-study expressed concern about the department's facilities. They are currently located in an unrenovated section on the first floor. While this is considered an improvement over the previous location on a higher floor as it has generated foot traffic and created a more collegial environment, it is lacking in many ways. The reviewers completed the INDS staff on their efforts to make the space more inviting. However, the space lacks a reception area and conference room. The reviewers also noted that stained carpets, faded linoleum and lack of storage space may send a signal of neglect to visitors. They suggest improvement of the physical facilities is a necessity particularly in the light of their perception that the administration wants to expand the role of INDS. They suggested relocation to more pleasant facilities adjacent to similar units.

On program growth, the reviewers did not get any explicit indications of a dissatisfaction between resources and enrollments. However, they did feel that there was a suggestion that INDS should be looking for ways to serve the broader UMBC community. The reviewers also felt that the satisfaction expressed by current and past students supported the expressed desire of the administration for the program to scale up. One suggestion they had for growing the program was to revamp the system for approving degree plans as the reviewers felt that was a limiting factor in enrollment. The reviewers immediate suggestion was to expand the departments services to non-INDS majors.

The reviewers found that the rebranding of the program presented a marketing opportunity for UMBC to attract students to university. They noted that UMBC had relatively few majors for a major research university. However, they also felt that the number of majors in the program needed to be carefully and gradually expanded.

Finally, the reviewers had a number of recommendation involving the curriculum that should be investigated: Increasing the minimum number of majors that must be used to three, minor changes to the degree plan approval process, modifications to the core INDS curriculum to possibly include allowing some courses to be taken simultaneously, and negotiation to relax some non-essential prerequisites that are causing students to take an unnecessary amount of courses to get through the major.