

MEMORANDUM

To: Antonio Moreira (Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, UMBC)
From: Anthony Paik (UMass-Amherst) and Nicholas Williams (Indiana University)
Date: 16 October 2018
Re: External review report

The overarching goal of INDS is rooted in its founding charge (under its predecessor name Option II), which stated the following: “*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...*” (Rosenthal, 1972). The contemporary iteration of this program, renamed the Individualized Study Program, offers students the opportunity to build their own majors through individualized degree programs, while utilizing a core sequence to promote the important task of integrating disparate disciplines into a coherent intellectual project. In terms of administrative structure, INDS, along with the Honors College and several smaller non-disciplinary units, is housed under the Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs as opposed to being placed in a specific college. In this sense, INDS is consistent in terms of academic mission and organizational structure with other individualized major programs (IMPs) around the country.

Individualized education at UMBC

The hallmarks of individualized education are a program that integrates multiple majors, meets student demand not addressed by the existing ecosystem of majors, and employs an intentional, planned process of individualized learning. These elements are all present at UMBC’s INDS. Indeed, we observed several value-added components at UMBC, including its focus on the epistemology of knowledge and the role of disciplines and interdisciplinarity, the scaffolding of core courses, the planned, directed nature of inquiry, the capstone, and a dedicated, passionate staff. UMBC is fortunate to have such excellent faculty and staff dedicated to individualized education.

This APR comes shortly after the approval of a name change – from “Interdisciplinary Studies Program” to “Individualized Study Program” – which was a response to larger campus dynamics regarding the disposition of interdisciplinarity in the administrative structure and curricula of UMBC. To the extent that INDS’s mission is to foster a specific type of interdisciplinarity – that is, individualized learning – the unit, we believe, 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.

Critically, the name change represents an opportunity for UMBC to market itself as a university not only with 48 majors but also with a strong program in individualized education.

Among the things the reviewers wished to discover while on campus was the sense from all stakeholders – staff, ISC, administrators, current students, alumni – on the significance of this name change. Alumni, understandably, regretted the change in name, since it seemed an ex-post-facto alteration of their previously established identity to which they were thoroughly committed and upon which they had already built their budding (and impressive) careers. Opinion among current students was more positive, with some students finding the new name more clearly communicative of their academic identities as “unconventional” students and others objecting to the non-consultative arrival of the change (although no one seemed irreconcilably opposed to the shift). Among staff, the response is perhaps best represented by the fortunate fact that the name change occurs with no change to the four-letter abbreviation, that is, it has seemed in some ways a distinction without a difference. We see this response as appropriate, given that, in many ways, INDS was an Individualized program all along, without being called such, in the degree of attention it gives to its students, in the fact that those students aim to find their own path through UMBC offerings, in the use of final projects for assessment, and in that assessment includes a strong moment of individual accounting before a board of faculty reviewers. Interdisciplinary programs need not, and often do not, include these individualized elements, and the fact that INDS always has included them suggests that they have simply found the name they were always perhaps in search of. Interdisciplinarity as intellectual content remains in the program, and there is no reason to think that INDS students will not be asked to integrate different disciplines as they move forward. Similarly, staff will likely continue to participate in academic conferences with the national community of interdisciplinary scholars, while also forming ties to the organization for Individualized Major Programs. The new title, however, does serve to identify the unique qualities of INDS in the campus ecosystem and perhaps serves as the strongest attraction to those students who are seeking a home among their fellow “unconventionals.”

INDS faculty and staff should be credited in their efforts to promote well-planned individualized study. One consequence of these efforts, we believe, is that INDS tends to redirect students exploring individualized options back to existing majors. Nevertheless, there is some lack of clarity about INDS’s niche in the ecosystem of majors, minors, and certificates, on the one hand, and interdisciplinary majors, on the other. In theory, students could double major, chose major and minor/certificate combinations, or pursue an INDS degree using similar courses. At the same time, interdisciplinary departments offer instruction by faculty from different disciplines. Within this ecosystem of degrees and certificates offered by disciplinary and interdisciplinary departments, INDS is well positioned to offer individualized degree programs that can fill ecological niches structurally left open by regulatory decree, on the one hand, or reflect the integration of three or more programs, on the other. Although INDS does not specify a minimum number of majors/disciplines for degree programs, our conversations with a small number of students revealed that their individualized degree programs minimally drew on three majors and to as high as 7 to 9. INDS clearly can operate in this niche, which is distinct from interdisciplinary majors as well as those students building double majors or a single major with a minor/certificate.

Curriculum

As an IMP, INDS employs more required coursework than most programs, but is in many ways ahead of the game. Whereas IMPs are attempting frequently to build a set of core required courses, which are scaffolded, INDS already has one in place with five sequenced courses (330/335 > 399 > 480 > 490) and one additional required course (430) to be taken concurrently. Students are prompted to develop rigorous degree plans and submit them to a large faculty-led committee (10 faculty and two students), which evaluates their appropriateness and rigor. In addition, each major is required to submit a capstone project, which can take the form of a scholarly paper or project.

Program Quality. The INDS curriculum appears to be high quality. While the quality of individual degree programs is likely to be heterogeneous, the use of the ISC integrates a quality-control check, ensuring that degree programs are feasible and consistent with students' learning exploration and INDS's learning outcomes. The core curriculum of INDS, in particular, strengthens students' focus on their commonality as individualized learners, generates student assessment as they progress through the major, and culminates in capstone projects. The co-teaching model employed by INDS ensures that students in core courses receive considerable feedback and advising. This is a strong curricular design for individualized learners who tend to be highly varied, but often face similar challenges navigating multiple disciplines and multiple epistemologies. The capstone project, in particular, directs students towards a culminating task that acts as integrative experience. In short, the INDS curriculum offers students shared educational experiences oriented towards integrative experiences and keeps them on track. It is, however, fairly extensive. There may be opportunities to streamline this curriculum, which could make INDS better suited for transfer students. Nevertheless, we view the current set-up – the development of individualized degree programs, the scaffolded core curriculum, and capstone projects – as consistent with best practices among IMPs.

The ISC in its current configuration, however, does impose significant burdens on faculty, staff, and student time. Currently, the ISC as a whole reviews every proposed degree program and votes on them once per semester. This can be a high-stakes situation, not unlike a proposal review process at NIH or NSF. One of the downsides of this approach is that it can be difficult to schedule meetings, making the ISC unwieldy. Moreover, faculty, staff, and students spend significant time and energy developing degree plans that may ultimately be rejected. In response to one of our questions, we were told that as little as 30 percent of degree plans on the docket were approved in one session. This process also gives a large amount of weight to committee members who may have no expertise in the particular disciplines included in a given degree plan. In response to this high-stakes set up, INDS faculty, staff, and advisors have sought to create a more collaborative approach by increasing the touchpoints between the ISC and students, as the latter are developing their degree programs.

The ISC may not be the most efficient process for developing degree plans. Whereas the ISC may be an effective structure for quality control in individualized degree programs, it might be less efficient, since a large number of faculty spend their time reviewing and evaluating relatively few degree programs. More decentralized approaches, such as those mirroring individual committees for each student, may achieve a similarly high level of quality control, but

allow for increased flexibility and efficiency in the process of approving degree plans. Decentralized systems, such as those utilized by our respective institutions, also integrate some faculty into the program as “repeat mentors” who might manage a set of advisees who are linked to their discipline or larger intellectual unit. These decentralized approaches employ additional compensation.

Students’ perception of quality. The current advising system and curricular structure for INDS works very well for the population of students served. Current students and alumni reported 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 that 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, to make an informed choice about their academic path, even when that path veered away from INDS.

Student learning outcomes. INDS has integrated student learning outcomes (SLOs) within core courses and across the curriculum. The INDS self-study lists specific learning objectives for each component (i.e., required course) of the INDS program as well as a mapping of program-level learning objectives to each course. The most direct assessment of student learning is grades. During the APR period, GPA has remained constant, which suggests that current INDS students are attaining similar levels of achievement as past cohorts. Indirect assessment of SLOs was INDS’s use of an exit interview to examine student satisfaction with the program. Although it is not mentioned in the SLO section of the INDS self-study, it became apparent to us that the capstone and the related defense, which involves presentations with Q&A, operates as form of program assessment. Integrating capstone projects and defenses into program assessment of SLOs may be an effective approach for “closing the loop.”

Program resources

Facilities. The current space INDS occupies, relocated from a higher floor in Fine Arts, has the advantage of student accessibility and (by academic standards) size. The staff should be credited for making the most of being dealt a “bad hand.” The staff have made the hallway friendly and inviting, but the lack of adequate reception space is a major facilities limitation. While students are admirably adaptable, stained carpets, faded linoleum, and the lack of storage risks sending the signal of neglect and marginality. Particularly if administrative desires for expanded activity in INDS are realized, an improvement in physical space would seem necessary. We had the opportunity to enjoy lunch with the staff in the conference room in the library, also meeting with the Director of the Honors College, and the possibilities of maximizing connections by co-location seem clear. We speak, of course, with incomplete knowledge about the complexities of space on campus, but with a general sense of the advantages to be had by strategic realignments of current units.

Program growth. The satisfaction registered by current and past students is a factor in thinking about the future growth of the program. We heard from administrators about the desirability of

“scaling up” the model INDS has created, a sentiment springing in part from a sense of the success INDS has achieved in retention and student satisfaction. Although we heard no direct expression of a mismatch between resources and enrollment in INDS, we did hear a gentler recommendation that the program look for opportunities to serve a broader population of UMBC students. The program approaches this issue with a bottom-line desire to protect the current advising and instructional structure and tests proposals to expand against the current high standards for student service. In particular, as we discussed above, the system for approving degree plans seems to impose limits on the size of the program, at least in terms of majors. It is, of course, possible to change the approval process, and we make recommendations on this matter.

More immediately, the program might develop opportunities to expand its service to non-majors looking to sharpen their sense of their own majors and to maximize their ability to “claim their education” (to cite the program’s motto, borrowed from poet Adrienne Rich). Our sense is that Steve Freeland is open to the possibility of growth in regard to serving non-majors, discussing with us, for instance, possibilities for serving pre-professional students in offerings of INDS 330 and 335. (These curricular innovations would serve as an answer to Question 2 provided by the program, regarding how INDS might serve non-majors.) Since one idea was that non-majors might run their proposed degrees through the same approval process (i.e., submission to the IPC) that INDS majors employ, the efficiency of that process becomes a limiting factor, perhaps necessitating some alterations.

Substantial growth in number of majors represents a greater challenge and while there might be room for some growth within current staff and physical resources, a significant increase in majors would require investments in staff especially (and space most likely). At the same time, there appear to be opportunities for combining fields in unique ways, adopting alternative interdisciplinary models (e.g., the CS + X model), offering established disciplines unavailable at UMBC (e.g., criminology, criminal justice, business majors, etc.), and developing tracks or pathways (e.g., digital humanities, area studies). We encourage collaboration among INDS, administration, and other units on campus designed to extend opportunities offered by the program to non-majors, as well as ongoing conversations between INDS and administrators regarding strategies for responsible growth in numbers of majors.

Responses to INDS Program Questions

1. Curriculum: How can INDS best serve transfer students who arrive at UMBC on an intended timeline to graduation that is a tight fit for the current required course sequence of at least four semesters?

Because INDS has a set sequence of courses taken over 4 semesters, it can be hard for the program to draw the attention of the large number of transfer students (although we certainly spoke with current students who had transferred to UMBC) looking to graduate quickly. In some ways, INDS is the victim of its own clarity about time to degree. We heard that transfer students often begin their career at UMBC with the idea that they might graduate in 4 semesters only to discover at a later date that that’s impossible; the difference is that INDS makes that schedule visible from the outset, thus discouraging some transfer students from considering it (especially

if it takes them a semester on campus to discover this offering). Program staff suggests that the timeline for transfer students might be shortened by allowing some of the required courses to be taken simultaneously, and we strongly encourage this strategy.

2. Student Profile: How can INDS serve non-majors to benefit a university in which four departments (Biological Sciences, Information Systems, Computer Science and Psychology) account for almost 50% of UMBC's undergraduate enrollment while other departments have seen sharp drops in enrollment over the past five years?

See section above entitled Program Growth.

3. Student Research: How should INDS balance the three-source sequence it has evolved to support high quality, independent research against the desire (and often need) of students to graduate quickly?

We mention in answer to the program's first question the possibility of allowing some of the courses in the core sequence to be taken simultaneously. Another issue that arose with some frequency, among both current students and alumni (and, for that matter, mentors), was the requirement to take pre-requisites in some units on campus in order to access the higher-level courses that were a student's main target. This issue, of course, is a perennial problem in Individualized Major Programs. In some instances, a unit's case for their pre-requisite, introductory course is entirely justified, in that the skills built in the prior class are necessary for work at a higher level. In other instances, an introductory class is used more as an overview of a discipline to aid students wishing to identify the areas they'll pursue in future coursework. In the latter case, requiring an introductory overview of a student who already knows their intended curricular goal seems a needless obstacle in the path of efficient progress. Since INDS is located outside the structure of the schools, designed to serve the campus at large, we suggest that administrators encourage departments to be flexible in letting students navigate required coursework in order to access the courses of most use to them. While we understand the enrollment pressures of all units on campus, the University's interests are served, as are the students, by distinguishing between courses needed for those specializing in a discipline and courses needed by those combining courses from several disciplines.

4. Facilities: How can the program mitigate negative aspects of recent program relocation (loss of a dedicated conference room, reduction in storage space, separation of staff offices and suboptimal student worker space/teaching space)?

See section above entitled Facilities.

5. Teaching: How can the program ensure faculty mentors feel empowered to teach and guide INDS students using the unusual, out-of-classroom settings often implied by this program? How can these opportunities be systematized to the benefit of all?

We often heard, from staff and from students past and present, about both the challenges of communicating with mentors and the great rewards reaped in the cases of strong mentor/student relationships. Even when there were reports of difficulties in coordinating with mentors,

students were highly respectful of the burdened time of faculty and the difficulty of taking on responsibilities outside of their required teaching, research and service. From administration, we heard of new efforts to “count” interdisciplinary work for tenure and promotion, but from faculty we heard that while some forms of activity might be entered in the credit column, work for INDS would not help in tenure or promotion. We leave it to the faculty and administration to resolve this difference of opinion, with the recommendation that if current structures don’t recognize the value of work for INDS, they should. The Individualized Major Programs that the reviewers have worked with also provide modest monetary rewards for mentors and/or for faculty who assess applications and final projects. This deployment of funds might go some way to signal appreciation of the commitments undertaken by faculty mentors. We have great respect for the use of non-faculty mentors in the broader community, drawing on the strengths of the surrounding community. Given our experiences in the use of retired faculty to assess admission proposals and final projects, we also recommend looking to this pool of experience, which can benefit the program as well as those retired faculty who are looking for ways to remain involved with UMBC while still enjoying their freedom.

6. Faculty and Staff Profile: How can INDS best respond to an observed trend that many students’ specific research (capstone) goals evolve considerably as their degree proceeds, such that student/mentor pairings can become ill-fitted by the time that the degree is nearing completion (a problem we learn is shared by similar programs at other institutions)?

This question relates to #5 and suggests that the program might think about the benefits of simplifying their mentorship process (i.e., allowing for one mentor to begin with, with the possibility of adding a second project-specific member, either on-campus or in the community, at a later time). This alteration would allow for responsiveness to the changing nature of student needs as the capstone project nears and also could relieve pressure on the demands on faculty time, particularly if the program is able to “scale up” significantly. Given its interdisciplinary past, the program has some investment in resisting the singular in its many forms (single disciplines, single sponsors, etc.), but perhaps a model which starts with a single sponsor and builds out as the capstone project approaches would be more sustainable.

Recommendations (referred to above):

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 Honors 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 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 aiding 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. Use of e-portfolios could help students develop their individualized degree programs effectively.