

Program Review Evaluation Team Report (3/22/07)

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Per Weber State University's guidelines, the 2007 Bachelor of Integrated Studies (BIS) Program Review Evaluation Team concluded that WSU'S BIS program meets all of the self-study standards. Below is the Review Team's evaluation of the program's strengths and challenges, as well as recommendations.

Strengths

1. Dedicated and effective staff coordinate the program.

Based on review of the extensive self-study materials, as well as interviews of current students, graduates, program staff and capstone faculty, the BIS Program Review Team concluded that one of the BIS program's primary strengths is its staff: Dr. Judy Elsley (Coordinator) and Pamela Jones (Student Specialist). With quick turnaround times, Dr. Elsley affords students personalized attention, including clear, meticulously organized information on expectations related to program content, expectations, and process. Interviewed students reported that Dr. Elsley keeps them on task toward degree completion by facilitating their preparation of capstone projects and navigation of the University system. Interviewed faculty reported great respect for Dr. Elsley, highlighting her effective management style, significant increases in the integrity of the program since she began coordinating it, her effective marshaling of and utilization of limited resources, her passionate advocacy on behalf of the program and individual students, her success in growing program enrollments, and her institution of the nominal faculty capstone incentive.

2. The flexible curriculum prepares students for their future endeavors.

In addition to a dedicated and talented staff, the BIS program features other primary strengths. Interviewed BIS students reported that the BIS program's flexible and still rigorous requirements and capstone meets their educational needs in ways that prepare them for new employment, professional advancement, and/or graduate school. Through the process of negotiating the program's three disciplinary emphases, students reported gaining self-sufficiency, confidence and leadership skills. The capstone is reportedly

personally meaningful, career-building and pragmatic. One student who is a military veteran stated that if it were not for the flexible and personal nature of the BIS program, he may not be able to earn a college degree.

Interviewed alumni report having gained skills, knowledge and experience related to writing, presenting, researching and negotiating. Interviewed alumni also reported appreciation for receiving a well-rounded education, being able to build their own self-designed WSU major, forging an effective degree from accrued credits earned from pursuing other majors prior to admission to the BIS program, applying their studies immediately to the workplace, and completing a degree that intrigues prospective employers due to its customized quality. One alumna who is considering opening an innovative business with three foci is confident that potential lenders will view her three emphases and related capstone project as evidence of her potential as a successful business owner. Another alumna reported a promotion to management in her health-care position as a result of presentation skills learned through the capstone project. In general, the interviewed alumni were strong advocates for a degree program that had enabled them in personal and professional ways.

Challenges and Recommendations

Most of the challenges facing the BIS program appear to be a result of resource constraints (e.g., stretched faculty with competing priorities including their own majors, a stretched program coordinator and a stretched support staff). The BIS Department accomplishes an impressive amount of work considering it is staffed by two half-time personnel. Most of the areas of concern cited by interviewed BIS students were areas inherent to integrated studies programs in higher education (e.g., challenges related to scheduling multiple faculty to attend the same meeting and negotiating the relative prominence of each emphasis in or the evaluation criteria for the capstone project).

Given these constraints and limitations, the peer review committee makes the following recommendations:

1. Revisit and expand the current assessment strategy.

Although the regularly collected self-reported data on the program are interesting and favorable, the BIS Department should consider conducting direct assessment (perhaps including pre-post-assessments and/or a rubric on student writing). Also, being that previous efforts to connect with alumni via mail have not been successful, the department should consider conducting phone surveys of alumni and pursuing receipt of more information from WSU'S Alumni Office.

2. Provide more assistance to students in purposefully integrating their disciplines.

Although the program is constrained by the lack of a core curriculum, measures could be taken to assist students in more purposefully integrating their three disciplinary emphases. For example, the BIS capstone preparation course could be team-taught by two faculty members from different disciplines so that students would witness two different perspectives being synthesized. A new, developmental advising model could be instituted in which students meet with an advisor each semester (rather than on an as needed basis) with each successive meeting devoted to increasingly complex discussions of disciplinary integration. Early meetings could be focused on identifying common ground among the disciplines, mid-level meetings could address tensions or differences among them, and later meetings could center on specific techniques for integration (e.g., applying one disciplinary concept to another field, developing hybrid genres or combining disciplinary methods to pursue an inquiry). A third option might be to institute additional advising meetings between the student and the capstone faculty advisors throughout the inquiry and writing process to discuss the process of and strategies for integration. Or, a more radical approach might be to reduce the number of disciplinary emphases to two in order to enable students the time to enroll in additional BIS core courses. Core courses could be offered by faculty with interdisciplinary training.

3. Create more opportunities for BIS students to interact.

Although challenges facing the creation of a BIS student community were raised by multiple constituencies, the Review Team suggests that further attempts to create opportunities for BIS students to interact, either inside or outside of class, be considered. There seems to be agreement in the current capstone class that, even though students' projects differ significantly, students find their shared BIS course to be a therapeutic experience through which they learned from others' dramatically different capstone work. BIS staff might consider the following opportunities: panels in which BIS alumni discuss the impact of the BIS program on their careers; pizza lunches in which seniors talk about the "do's and don'ts" of the capstone to sophomores and juniors; award ceremonies for outstanding capstones to which parents, family members and university officials are invited; a special graduation ceremony for BIS students; interdisciplinary symposia at least partially sponsored by BIS, drawing on work being done by colleagues across the University.

4. Collaborate with other offices on campus more formally.

The Department may also consider leveraging existing and potential collaborations. To add strength to the partnerships, the BIS Department may want to consider formalizing its collaborations with the Office of Undergraduate Research and the Community-Based and Experiential Learning office. New BIS Department collaborations could include a training

initiative in collaboration with the faculty Teaching & Learning Forum, as well as the creation of a university-wide taskforce on integrated/interdisciplinary studies. In general, any collaboration with other departments and faculty involved in interdisciplinary work would raise levels of awareness within and without the program.

5. Revitalize and utilize the BIS program Advisory Board.

The program may also consider revitalizing the Advisory Board, perhaps as a working committee with rotating members for the purpose of increasing the number of formal liaisons and informal ambassadors in the University community. A working board could significantly contribute to the workload, perhaps affording the Department the time to develop a strategic plan with one issue to be delegated to the Board for input per year. The Board could be weighted based on departments most involved with BIS or units that have a vested interest in the yearly strategic planning issue.

6. Increase recognition of the program's value and identification.

One broad area of student concern that the Review Team suggests be addressed relates to the program's need to continue to cultivate recognition of the program's value and identification, namely in terms of academic department training, University Commencement, and the Graduation Convocation.

Students suggested increased BIS program training of University personnel (e.g., namely academic department secretaries, participating faculty and University Commencement personnel). Students report sometimes feeling as if they had to train WSU personnel on program polices and procedures. The Review Committee acknowledges that there are always significant challenges related to training of personnel who do not report to your area, even if it just requires periodic review of written and e-mailed materials. Interviewed alumni reported feeling slighted by Commencement-related personnel's confusion about which colored garb and tassel they should receive, with which group they were scheduled to walk, and why.

Concerning Commencement, interviewed alumni voiced interest in allowing graduating BIS students to choose with which College they would walk. Concerning Convocation, alumni suggested that what feels as if it is an arbitrary assignment to the College of Arts & Humanities should be reconsidered. They reported interest in attending the Convocation of their choice, based on one or more of their emphases. Although it is acknowledged that adding another University convocation would be financially prohibitive, the BIS Program Review Team suggests that BIS consider affording students choice concerning Commencement and Convocations and that an evening reception be funded for BIS students, perhaps one modeled after WSU's Master of Education reception or receptions offered to graduates of other institutions' integrated studies programs.

7. Increase resources to expand the program.

Interviewed BIS constituents voiced hope that the University's administration increases support of the program in ways that also encourage members of the University community to further embrace the program. It is agreed that this will require the support of the Provost's Office, namely the Associate Provost [position vacant] to whom Dr. Elsley reports.

Should Weber State University want to expand the BIS program, the Program Review Team suggests some feasible starting points. The Team suggests an increase in staff (or at least an increase to full-time status for personnel) and other resources. This could include an increase in the Student Specialist's hours from 20 to 40, moving the FYE Coordinator to a full-time position, and/or hiring an Assistant Director who could be responsible for such things as assessment, faculty development, and Advisory Board development.

In addition to increased staffing, additional marketing resources would need to be funded to afford the BIS program more exposure. The BIS website could be leveraged as a more powerful marketing tool if it included additional information, photos, descriptions, student/alumni profiles, testimonials and accomplishments. For possible examples of websites of similar programs, see Wayne State University's Interdisciplinary Studies Department website at <http://www.clas.wayne.edu/IS/> or University of Maryland, Baltimore County's Interdisciplinary Studies Program website at <http://www.umbc.edu/inds>.