

## **Bachelor of Integrated Studies**

**Site Visit April 5, 2012**

### **Introduction**

The Bachelor of Integrated Studies is an innovative and exciting degree offering at Weber State University. It is a program designed primarily for students who have specific, and perhaps unique, educational goals and career objectives that are best served by combining aspects of several fields of study. The objectives of the program are quite clearly defined and carefully developed. They include foundational knowledge in three separate disciplines, analytical and problem solving skills, a senior applied project and the development of a life plan that reflects the program of study. The degree program requirements are structured adequately to achieve these objectives. The program has evolved significantly since its inception and has incorporated, over time, various suggestions and recommendations for improvement. Based on observations, interviews, review of curriculum, and survey of the assessment data, it is the opinion of the site visit team that the BIS program is successfully achieving the goal of providing a viable, academically rigorous, and marketable degree option for Weber State University students.

### **Program Leadership**

Dr. Kathleen Sitzman and her staff are doing an excellent job managing the Integrated Studies office and program. All aspects of the BIS department, including website presence and maintenance, resources available to students and faculty, and daily logistical coordination, are reflective of excellent leadership and competent administrative support. Regarding Dr. Sitzman's leadership, it was evident in our discussions with her that she is passionate about the program and is dedicated and committed to its success. Perhaps most noteworthy is her commitment to the students. She places their needs and educational objectives first. Several people commented on how carefully and thoughtfully she counsels students who are entering the program to make sure that the objectives and structure of the Integrated Studies degree fit the needs of the students. It is not uncommon for her to recommend other academic degrees that are better suited to a student's career objectives. She gives a very personal feel to the program. Often she will escort students around campus to make sure they arrive at the appropriate office and are taken care of.

The Bachelor of Integrated Studies crosses academic departments and requires the support and involvement of a diverse group of faculty. Dr. Sitzman has done an excellent job reaching out to the faculty and departments across campus carefully explaining the benefits of the program, soliciting faculty involvement, streamlining the procedures to make it friendly for the faculty as well as for the students. She has spent time orienting the faculty, providing packets of materials and offering her personal support to ensure that the faculty committee members and the student work collaboratively to achieve a successful conclusion.

Since Dr. Sitzman became the coordinator five years ago, standards for the capstone project have increased significantly, thus improving the credibility of the BIS program in the eyes of other faculty. The BIS program is largely viewed as a thorough and rigorous integration of academic disciplines and not the sum product of simply combining three minors. Students in the program are held to a high level of academic and personal expectation and, based on the quality of capstone projects, seem to be meeting the goals associated with enhanced learning outcomes. In fact, one faculty member commented that the BIS stands as the example for the rest of the campus community to follow in terms of “how to carry out assessment of capstone projects.”

### **Faculty Support**

It appears that for the most part there is broad faculty support for integrated studies degree. This is due in part to Dr. Sitzman who has worked diligently at promoting the program and explaining its purpose and benefits. It is also apparent that faculty members at Weber State University are truly committed to serving students and assisting in their educational success. The faculty seems to enjoy the interaction with other faculty from different disciplines in this unique and creative learning experience.

It is not easy to draw faculty from across a large university into a cross disciplinary program of this kind. Continuous effort is needed to reach out to faculty, to help them understand clearly the purpose of the capstone project, and to explain their role as committee members. Faculty members do not always give timely feedback to students on their projects. Some are not as responsive to, or accessible to, students as others. There have been occasions when disagreements over the final grades have occurred. However, these challenges are not common and do not significantly detract from the success of the capstone project. They can be addressed over time. They also give the student opportunity to develop skills of diplomacy and tact that will serve them well in the work world.

### **Advising and Student Services**

Advising is particularly important in this program. The Bachelor of Integrated Studies attracts students that may not know what they want to study or may have multiple interests and are searching for a program that will help them integrate these interests. Dr. Sitzman is doing a wonderful job meeting with students, discussing their interests, assessing the fit between a student’s goals and the objectives of the program. Careful departmental advising is also critical. Students need guidance and encouragement when they approach a department requesting participation in their integrated studies curriculum.

The Service Learning Center was highlighted as a key partner, with up to seven students annually doing service learning projects to satisfy their capstone requirement. There seems to be a culture of support for the BIS program and areas of the campus, like the Service Learning Center, have recognized the natural partnerships which already exist that can be cultivated for mutual benefit.

There were some concerns expressed about the responsiveness of university's career services department to the needs of BIS students. Dr. Sitzman has reached out the career services department and provided helpful information about the BIS program and pathways to employment, but there still remains a "disconnect" between the traditional approaches used by the institution's career development services and the unique needs of BIS majors.

### **Support of the Administration**

The University administration has been very supportive of the Bachelor of Integrated Studies. Dr. Sitzman reports to the Provost, Dr. Michael Vaughn, and to the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Ryan Thomas. Both give their full support to the purpose and objectives of the program. To the extent possible, sufficient physical and financial resources have been given to the program to support its mission and growth. Without the support of the administration, it would be extremely difficult for the degree to flourish.

### **Program Assessment**

Dr. Sitzman has done an excellent job building assessment into the degree. On her own, she embarked on an ambitious project to build an assessment tool that can be used to evaluate the learning outcomes of the capstone project. Using the six learning objectives of the integrated studies program, she built a rubric that is used to evaluate each capstone project. Then she applied this rubric to the previous 197 completed projects which covered a six year period. With these data Dr. Sitzman has been able to determine how much learning has taken place on each of these objectives and how the learning has changed over that period of time. This work will provide the foundation upon which the program and the capstone course can measure its success and the skills and knowledge acquired by the students.

### **Recommendations**

The site-visit team readily acknowledges the hard work of Dr. Sitzman and her colleagues to build a remarkable program. These seven recommendations are made in the spirit of advancing the student experience, enhancing recognition of the program by other campus entities, and providing opportunities for Weber State to lead a system-wide effort to improve the visibility, viability and perceptions of integrated studies program across the state and region.

1. It is important that BIS majors be provided venues where their work can be celebrated, highlighted and recognized beyond the project defense. A lot of time is spent by the students on the capstone project. There are many creative and innovative projects that are having significant impact on the community. These projects and the results need to be advertised more broadly. Would it be possible to publish an annual report of these capstone projects, their objectives, the parties involved, the community or academic impact, and statements of endorsement? This is one way to highlight student achievement, university involvement in the community, faculty commitment to student success, and new approaches to innovative learning. This

recommendation may also be facilitated, in part, by providing BIS majors opportunities to showcase their projects within established events across campus, and in the community.

2. The projects are currently bound with spiral binding and housed in the Integrated Studies office. In light of the amount of work involved by students and faculty and the level of creativity and scholarship, it might be more appropriate to hard bind the projects similar to a thesis. These books could be placed in the library, exhibited on shelves by faculty committee members and shown to potential employers when students are interviewed. These are projects to be proud of.

3. At the present time, faculty members agree to participate on project committees because they are committed to student success and enjoy the cross disciplinary interaction. Faculty participants can purchase a book of their choice as a token of appreciation for their involvement. This seems to be well received. However, support for faculty participation in the program should not rely solely upon the minimal resources and token gifts offered by the BIS program alone. Faculty members who participate provide a significant amount of time and effort to supervise and mentor student projects. If the university is invested in the success and quality of the BIS program and desires to bolster faculty support from across disciplines, more substantive remuneration practices could strengthen faculty support. Load reductions, for example, like those recommended for advising research courses at WSU (1/4 hour per student), might be appropriate recognition for faculty who already carry significant teaching, research and service loads.

4. The core curriculum of the integrated studies degree consists of two courses (5 credits), BIS 3800, Capstone and Graduation Preparation, and BIS 4800, The BIS Capstone. It may be helpful to add a third course that expands on the theory and practice of interdisciplinary thought. We live in a global and complex society. Students with the skills to see connections, build bridges, integrate diverse and contradictory ideas, and manage complex projects will be far ahead of those with a narrower focus.

5. As universities within the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) design and implement “integrated studies” degree programs, it would be strategically advantageous for associated program coordinators to develop a system-wide network to help facilitate common goals and objectives. Some of these goals may be to identify and outline articulation between programs, to provide networking and professional and scholarly opportunities for faculty and students, and to share ideas for program improvement. Because Weber State’s BIS degree is well organized and superbly administered, others from around the state of Utah, with similar programs of study, would benefit from formal interaction with Dr. Sitzman and her faculty colleagues. It is recommended that those associated with the BIS program at Weber State reach out to colleagues from across the state and begin a formal dialogue about the potential of inter-campus collaboration.

6. Dr. Sitzman does an admirable job of cultivating faculty support for the program. It seems the academic administration has an opportunity to assist Dr. Sitzman by building into the formal orientation of new faculty information about the BIS program. Since the BIS is multi-disciplinary in nature and requires the participation of faculty from across campus, some “significant” attention to the program during new faculty orientation may help to alleviate misinformation while cultivating interest among willing faculty partners.

7. Based on the feedback of the students interviewed during the site visit, there is a lack of support from Weber State’s career services department for BIS majors. The perceived lack of support does not appear to be intentional, but seems to be the symptom of a lack of familiarity on the part of career services staff with the unconventionality of the BIS program’s related pathways to employment. Even though Dr. Sitzman has reached out to career services staff to educate them on how they can work effectively with BIS majors relative to job preparation and employment seeking strategies, there seems to be a need for those staff members to do their own investigation and perhaps look at how other institutions effectively provide services to students with similar majors. It would be helpful for the BIS program to collect employment data from those who hire BIS graduates as a means to help educate the career services department.

## **Conclusion**

Weber State University’s Bachelor of Integrated Studies program is a model of efficiency and campus-wide collaboration. There seems to be broad acceptance of the program across campus as well as a healthy base of students participating in the major. The synthesis of three distinct disciplines, coupled with a rigorous capstone project and defense, reflects real integration and establishes the program as a truly viable option for students seeking this type of educational experience. Under Dr. Sitzman’s leadership, a climate of acceptance and support has been cultivated for the program and she should be encouraged to continue her efforts to advance the quality of the program. Recommendations have been made to assist in that effort. Overall, the site visit team is complimentary of the program and anticipates further refinement as the program evolves.

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