

Academic Program Review Self-Study Report
Arizona State University
APPENDIX A – 2008 ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW
MEMORANDUM

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 25, 2008

TO: Maria T. Allison
Vice Provost and Dean, Graduate College

FROM: Frederick C. Corey
Director, School of Letters and Sciences
Dean, University College

RE: Academic Program Review, Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies



The Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies degree program was founded in 1995, and during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years, we conducted the first academic program review of this degree. The purpose of this memorandum is to respond to the comments made by the external reviewers and outline a plan of action to move the degree program forward.

The external reviewers, William H. Newell and Stuart Henry, offered six useful suggestions following their site visit to Arizona State University. These suggestions include the alignment of the core curriculum, working toward a common definition of “interdisciplinary,” a reformulation of the “concentrations” as disciplinary minors, academic advising that assists students with the selection of the minor areas, the creation of an advisory board, and the development of an active alumni association.

Alignment of the Core Curriculum

The core curriculum is composed of four courses: BIS 301 Foundations of Interdisciplinary Studies; BIS 302 Interdisciplinary Studies; BIS 401 Applied Interdisciplinary Studies; and BIS 402 Senior Seminar. As noted by the reviewers, the ASU BIS core curriculum has a structure that models the best designs in the nation, but the four courses must be sequential and progressively complex, and the foundation courses in particular must have the same learning objectives regardless of the instructor.

The faculty of interdisciplinary studies met in December 2007 and January 2008 to create common course objectives for BIS 301 and BIS 302. After completing the introductory course, BIS 301, students should be able to:

- Understand and explain the following terms: academic disciplines/disciplinary, crossdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary.

- Gain awareness of the history, background, and context of interdisciplinary studies.
- Be able to identify and present key characteristics of at least two specific disciplines.
- Examine, apply, or compare key insights, concepts or theories from each discipline to illustrate the disciplinary perspective.
- Draw connections between multiple disciplines, including the student's own specific areas of study.
- Apply at least one model/framework of integration.
- Understand how disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity function outside the university.
- Understand organizational trends as related to notions of interdisciplinarity.
- Assess individual strengths and opportunities for improvement with respect to future success in increasingly interdisciplinary workplaces and social settings.

The second course in the core sequence is the research methods course and is uniformly based on a common set of learning objectives through which the students be able to:

- Ask appropriate questions about the nature of knowledge, such as: value and relevance, philosophy of science, evidence associated with a claim, believability of expert opinion, use of statistics, bias, reliability, and validity.
- Comment on the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to research/inquiry, and how multiple modes of research serve as tools to solve interdisciplinary questions/issues.
- Differentiate between qualitative and quantitative research, and understand some of the different research approaches that are associated with each.
- Understand the distinction between primary and secondary research, and the role of existing literature.
- Analyze research problem(s) using at least two different perspectives.
- Understand that different disciplines use different approaches to inquiry.
- Understand how to design and structure an investigation.
- Perform primary research.
- Analyze and reflect on process and/or results of primary research.
- Understand research ethics.

BIS 401 is an applied learning experience and takes the form of an apprenticeship, internship, study abroad experience, or individualized research project. The faculty are now working on common learning outcomes. The preliminary outcomes are to:

- Apply the concepts of interdisciplinarity and the associated terms (disciplines, multidisciplinary and crossdisciplinary) to the applied studies site.
- Assess how the organization functions in an integrative manner.

- Gain awareness of how skills, talents, education and career aspirations mesh with the applied learning experience.
- Create materials to showcase skills and knowledge to a prospective employer.
- Apply academic concepts, theories or analytical techniques to the experiential setting.
- Evaluate how the organization identifies and solves problems or plans for the future.

The final core course, BIS 402, is a senior seminar focusing on a specific theme, and the students select a theme related to their academic and career plans. Sample seminar topics include The Global Workplace, Educational Psychology, The Integrated Self, Innovation and Creativity, Diversity in America, and Science and Technology. The learning outcomes will be specific to the topic of the seminar, but we are able to create an “audit” to ensure the content represents a progression of difficulty.

Common Definition

The faculty are examining definitions of interdisciplinarity and arriving at a consensus on definitional elements that inform every aspect of the curriculum. The goal is to organize a range of definitions that present increasing complexity through the core sequence of classes. The primary definitional elements include:

- a. Explicit use of disciplinary knowledge, concepts, and theories.
- b. Focus on complex problems, issues, questions, and aesthetics that exceed the limits of single disciplines.
- c. Conscious application of integrative methods and processes.

The use of a progressive definition will avoid the problems of a sole definition which would be accompanied by a single-source citation and fallacies of intention. The progressive definition will be completed by the summer of 2008.

Concentrations vs. Minors

The external review report recommends a reframing and restructuring of “concentrations” to parallel ASU’s minors and certificates. This change will ease administrative and linguistic confusion, simplify the DARS encoding process, and make it easier for our academic advisors to advise students. It may also ease coordination with the academic units offering the minors. We agree that any minors with fewer than 18 required credits should be supplemented when used for a BIS degree so that students must complete at least 18 credits (12 upper division credits) in each disciplinary area.

Academic Advising

Advisors are actively pursuing ways to help students select minor areas that best serve their academic, personal, and career interests. An online orientation – the cyberworkshop – is undergoing substantial revisions to allow students to learn more about potential minor areas and map out their interests. Thus, time spent with academic advisors can be put to good use, and students can discover early in their studies the minor areas that will serve them well to graduation and beyond.

Additionally, the minors and certificates from which the students may choose their two areas have now been “clustered” around disciplinary and career themes.

Advisory Board

The Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies degree program had an “advisory board” in the 1990s. I was a member of the board. The board had no agenda, mission, purpose, or responsibility. We gathered three or four times a year and received updates on enrollments. We are in favor of creating an advisory board, but before we create a board, we need to determine its function.

Alumni Relations

The relationship between the School of Letters and Sciences and the alumni of the interdisciplinary studies degree program has improved dramatically during the current academic year. Three specific actions include:

- Partnering with the Office of Annual Giving to develop contact lists with all alumni for whom the university has a good address.
- Establishing the Interdisciplinary Studies Legacy Scholarship. To date, we have collected \$6,000 in donations from alumni for this fund.
- Hosting the first “Signature Event” on April 17, 2008, at the University Club of Phoenix, to which 200 alumni have been invited. We are expecting 80 alumni to attend.

Summary

The external reviewers observe that ASU’s interdisciplinary studies degree program has “developed into one of the leading Bachelor’s of Interdisciplinary Programs in the country; it is clearly in the top five of approximately 250 similar programs.” We have the intellectual capacity, energy, and dexterity needed to become widely acknowledged as the very best program of its type in the nation. We will continue working on the alignment of the curriculum, definitional elements of the degree program, clarity of the concentrations as minors, academic advising, meaningful advisory board, and alumni relations during the present and upcoming academic years.