Bachelor’s Degree with Individual Concentration

An unaffiliated program of the University offering individualized B.A. and B.S. degrees.

The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

James Hall, Rochester Institute of Technology
Elizabeth Parmelee, Metropolitan State University of Denver
Susanne Wofford, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University

Main Issues

The external report described a “thriving community” of mentors with a strong reputation for serving nontraditional students eager to complete their degree using a nontraditional pathway. Founded in the 1970s, the BDIC program serves a diverse array of students and “provides an appealing option” for students who withdrew from the University’s traditional undergraduate program or had never attended an institution of higher learning in the first place. The committee noted that BDIC students “reflect the cutting edge” through their “interest and motivation” to learn, and that faculty and leadership in the program have “anticipat[ed] future trends both in the labor market and in academia.”

The review committee championed in particular the degree proposal and curriculum design process that BDIC compels students to undertake, calling them “well-developed” requirements that “enhance the academic quality of the program.” Recruitment and marketing to potential BDIC students from among traditional University cohorts has grown to include a freshman gateway course entitled “How To Design Your Own Major,” as well as “touch point” courses in which sophomores, juniors and seniors can enroll as they discern their academic interests and ultimately design their proposal. Staff and faculty, though limited in numbers and largely part-time, are dedicated to “making the program work for students.” The overall success of BDIC’s approach is reflected in the number of alumni-based donations received each year and the esteemed national profile that the program has earned.

The review team made a number of specific findings and recommendations:

- Owing in part to recent growth in student interest coupled with staffing issues, the committee expressed concern over the way that BDIC advises students. Each student must work with a faculty sponsor from an academic department and has access to peer mentors from within the program, but advising in general suffers from a lack of continuity and dedicated staff.
- Similarly, low levels of investment and engagement by instructors reflects the low number of tenured faculty involved in the program. Although there are many faculty who are highly dedicated to the students they serve in BDIC, the lack of a full-time faculty director is “striking” and the committee recommended the exploration of a permanent appointment.
- Marketing efforts have achieved modest aims at recruiting internal students from traditional academic programs at the University, but little effort is being made to identify potential
students from surrounding communities and the region who may be attracted to the more individualized program.

- The BDIC program has not demonstrated a culture of ongoing evaluation in the collection of baseline and benchmark data. The absence of these data manifests as a weakness in both student learning assessment and the strategic planning process.

**Results of the Review**

The Department discussed the report prepared by the external reviewers and offered a general response to their recommendations. The leadership of BDIC agreed with the reviewers’ commentary about staffing, advising and curriculum and the possibility of additional pinch points as the program continues to grow in enrollment. It laid out several alternative pathways for restructuring, including moving under the umbrella of the University’s Commonwealth Honors College. BDIC also agreed with several of the recommendations about strengthening the curriculum and enhancing programmatic development, as well as the need for a more regularized collection of outcomes data to guide evaluative and strategic planning efforts.

**Outcomes Assessment**

The Bachelor’s Degree with Individual Concentration program has an established set of student learning objectives, which include interdisciplinary learning; career development; leadership and entrepreneurship; self-advocacy; and writing and speaking. The program uses a series of direct and indirect measures to determine if these learning outcomes are being met, including robust appraisal of concentration proposals by multiple readers; a senior summary consisting of student course evaluations; and alumni surveys.

**Student Retention and Graduation Rates**

BDIC’s student enrollment has fluctuated over the past ten years, achieving a high-water mark of 144 students in 2010 before receding to 119 students in 2014. Because BDIC does not admit freshmen to its program, the persistence data available for more traditional undergraduate programs are not applicable to BDIC students. However, the number of degrees awarded by the BDIC program has been strong and relatively flat, with 97 degrees awarded in 2005 (approximately 68% of the total enrollments in that year) and 78 degrees awarded in 2014 (approximately 66% of the total enrollments in that year).