Two Year Progress Report of Independent Studies, Faculty of Arts

The self-study for Independent Studies (IS) was submitted 7 October, 2009, and the review team’s report was received 5 January, 2010. The report on IS was approved by Senate Undergraduate Council on 13 April, 2010, and was submitted to Senate on 17 May, 2010. This document reports on actions taken in the subsequent two years.

Key goals of self-study and recommendations of site visit team:

1. Admission requirements and enrolment

   IS continues to evaluate and benchmark the newly-introduced Honours plan as well as the Three-year General plan, for quality, student experience, and retention. We are particularly interested in the perceived value of IS 100, 200, and 330, now required of students in the Honours stream, and we will continue to adjust these courses or supplement them as a result of student outcomes.

   The review team suggested recruiting only students with at least one year of University education. A minimum entry average reflective of an “elite” program was recommended. The rationale for these recommendations was two-fold: to better differentiate IS from other “interdisciplinary” programs like the Knowledge Integration (KI) (which does recruit from high school) and programs like Liberal Studies (which, like IS, is regrettably perceived by some as a “when all else fails” program). In response, IS is scrutinizing its applicants more carefully with a view to excellence: all must now meet Honours-level standards for entrance as they are placed automatically in the new Honours IS plan. As well, direct high-school entry will be discontinued beginning in 2013, aligning the IS recruitment strategy with those of the bulk of the other Arts plans. Underlining the above points is the overall enrolment goal of 50 students by 2016. At this writing, the program has actually dipped from its decadal average of about 27-30 students to 18-20.

   It is believed that via the new recruitment strategy developed in conjunction with Arts, further promotion and marketing within the University (as most students are internal transfers), higher retention of existing students, and improved messaging in social media and other venues, this target can be met.

2. Program structure and curriculum

   The key recommendations were to tighten the program’s structure by requiring Honours students complete IS 100, IS 200, and IS 330 (we are indeed committed to this sequence and offer these courses regularly) and to provide more mandatory small group courses and/or to require students pursuing studies in existing disciplinary formations to take foundational courses in the appropriate Faculty. The IS position on the latter point is that the close relationship of student to IS advisor ensures that, in effect, disciplinary “grounding” does occur in the pre-thesis phase. Students work with
advisors each term to create a formal “term plan,” which specifies the courses to be taken with a view to preparing the student to write his or her thesis. No additional structure, then, is deemed necessary to qualify students for their thesis project.

3. **Mode of delivery**
   Reviewers suggested IS develop online materials and web-based tools that could help facilitate both true distance students and on-campus students to achieve their learning goals. There is great interest in doing so. IS intends to avail itself of the new LEARN platform to streamline the delivery of all its required courses, and to use the e-portfolio feature to keep track of students’ work products. This remains an aspirational goal at present, pending adequate training of key advisors and staff. One recommendation—to recruit Faculty-specific advisors to match student interests better—may be difficult to implement, given the IS budget realities and the equity issues of requiring a great number of other academic units (whose investment in IS students at the level of occasional mentoring and supervising is already much appreciated) to expand their workloads to do IS advising.

4. **Student progress**
   The main issue here was to eliminate the pass/fail mode and move to numerical grades exclusively. We have done so—with some exceptions. As a program, IS does now default to the numerical mode. We do retain the option of pass/fail for those situations in which a student needs to acquire competency in an area related to thesis work but which is otherwise peripheral to their developing expertise. Another recommendation was to reformulate the weighting of the thesis (reducing it to 40% of the final year rather than 100%). The IS Board and the Director strongly believe, however, that the thesis is the centerpiece of the program, and that to reduce its weighting would be to undermine the core principles of the program itself. As well, the rationale of the recommendation was in part to ensure that the thesis project was benchmarked more nearly like theses in other Departments. But to do so would de-differentiate IS in a way that would decrease its ability to attract students who want to be fully immersed in a true self-directed research experience. At present, then, we have no plans to change the thesis weighting.

5. **Human, physical, and financial resources**
   The report recommended a cross-appointed faculty position with 40% time allotted for administrative duties. A new Director (Andrew McMurry) was installed, though not precisely under those terms: 20% from Arts plus 10% from the Provost, i.e., a three course teaching release, with one of the releases going to student advising, not administration. Integration of “well-qualified UW instructional staff into the program’s advising and teaching functions” was also suggested. In response, a new advisor (Linda Carson) was added to the unit. Carson also teaches in KI, and her exemplary skill set in alternative modes of learning is well-matched to the IS program. A physical move from Modern languages (ML) to East Campus Hall (ECH) occurred shortly after the review team’s report was submitted, and the new facilities proved to be relatively comfortable and well-designed for IS needs.
6. **Effectiveness in planning**
   Three longer term goals in both the self-study and the site review were to 1) increase the hours of the administrative position from 20 hours per week to full-time by 2016, 2) increase gradually the number of advisors from three to five as enrolment increases, and 3) consider a graduate program. The first two goals continue to be priorities (though they hinge, as with much else, on increasing enrolment as noted in item 1. above), but plans for a graduate program are on hold. The next few years will determine how well IS can differentiate itself from its nearest competitors (Liberal Studies and KI), and whether its self-conception as a small, elite, niche program will continue to attract a sufficient number of students. There continues to be interest from former students and those in the wider community for a graduate program, but the priority is to ensure that the new Honours program succeeds before beginning to explore the need for an IS Masters.

7. **Other issues, new issues**
   Joint majors: currently, IS students may pursue concurrent degrees with the Bachelor of Independent Studies (BIS). We are in discussion with Arts about the possibility of a compressed “Discipline X and Independent Studies BA.” Such a plan would allow students to receive a traditional disciplinary major and pursue an independent research program within the timeframe of a regular Honours degree.

   Faculty renewal: retired faculty members seem both experientially and practically well suited to IS advising roles. They bring a wealth of pedagogical insight and wide-ranging knowledge to our unit (indeed, our most senior advisor, Anne Dagg, recently signed a book contract with Cambridge University Press). Discussions are ongoing with recent retirees to consider continuing their relationships with the University of Waterloo through a role in IS.

   Academic Board appointments: we will acknowledge better faculty members’ contribution in this regard by ensuring that Chairs and Deans understand the service commitment of faculty members associated with IS.

   Alumni development: in conjunction with Arts Advancement, a reunion is planned for the fall of 2012. A co-op student was hired to help plan and develop an alumni network.