

Directed Interdisciplinary Studies Program at Montana State University Review

Overall Assessment of the Directed Interdisciplinary Studies Degree

The Directed Interdisciplinary Studies (DIS) major is a unique degree program that attracts some of the highest quality students at Montana State University (MSU). There are several aspects that make this degree program distinctive. It is a highly selective degree that focuses more on the quality of its students rather than the quantity of students in the program. All students who would like to transfer into the program have to complete a rigorous application process that includes a high GPA requirement, a detailed description of their proposed project, and an interview with the Director and members of the DIS Oversight Committee, representing input from colleges across campus. Students choosing to undertake this degree are contradictorily both very broad in their interests and hyper focused on what they want to do during their degree. The rigor of the program has meant that DIS students have been self-motivated and high achieving with successes both internal and external. The proportion of DIS students receiving external, nationally competitive awards is high and elevates the prestige of the University.

The DIS program is unique compared to IS degrees at other universities in that it offers both a BA and BS option. In addition, DIS students have the option of doing either academic research or a creative piece for their project. The structure of the degree highlights its interdisciplinarity with the requirement of 30 credits in each of three distinct disciplines (90 credits overall). The community engagement aspect to the students' work also adds a unique element. DIS students also take, on average, more upper division courses than students in most majors on campus. Overall, the DIS degree at MSU is of a high quality and the students coming out of the program are very impressive. However, to this point the DIS degree has depended on a number of factors that could easily change and diminish the quality of the program. In particular, the program's success has relied upon a number of key faculty, including the Director, being willing to volunteer their time to advise and work with these students.

Based on our analysis of the DIS degree we have some specific recommendations to strengthen the program:

- Compensation or service recognition for faculty advisory committee members.
- Allowing students some flexibility in designing their three-year course plan by including a series of course options as a way to overcome curricular changes due to unanticipated scheduling issues.
- Guaranteeing students in the degree the ability to take courses across the campus in any Department.
- Hiring a Director for the program whose time allocation is at least 50% towards the DIS degree.

Strategies to Increase Diversity Among Students

Acknowledging that this is a small sample size, the demographics of the DIS degree are very similar to those of MSU overall. However, the program would benefit from added diversity to its student population. One recommendation for increasing diversity would be to increase the marketing of the program to students. There is no current active marketing of the program

and its presence on MSU's website is somewhat hidden. Half of the students had heard about the program before they arrived, but the other half only learned about the program through word of mouth. Several current and former students told stories of friends who wished they had known about the program earlier in their academic career. The goal of additional marketing would not be to increase the number of students in the degree, but to allow every student at MSU a chance at applying for the major. By raising awareness of the degree, the program could reach more students who would not otherwise know about the program including students who are BIPOC. Marketing the program to the general MSU student population, however, would severely overtax the DIS Program as currently resourced. Another option would be to selectively target student populations such as the Native American and Veteran populations, which may be underserved and especially open to designing their own degrees. This targeted marketing could help MSU achieve Goal 3.1 of the Strategic Plan.

Increasing Tenure-track Faculty Service on Faculty Advisory Committees

One of the key elements of the DIS degree is that it runs based on volunteer service from both TT faculty and NTT faculty. For TT faculty there should be a way to receive service credit or compensation for their work. NTT faculty should not be doing this work unless they receive some form of compensation. Despite their desire to help the students, and to work with what are exceptionally gifted students, NTT faculty are contract employees who receive no compensation for this work. In addition, pre-tenured TT faculty are disincentivized to work with DIS students because they do not get any service credit. That reduces their willingness to take part on faculty advisory committees. The DIS students were aware that their faculty advisors were doing this voluntarily, so they were often hesitant to talk with their committee because they felt as if they were impinging upon their time.

Data Collection for the Annual Program Assessment Report

The DIS program is in a unique position in terms of data collection in that there are no common classes for the students. Currently the assessment is focused entirely on the thesis defense including a public engagement component. Given this focus the questions asked for data collection are appropriate and match the PLOs. However, as discussed below, there is the need for more student connectedness as well as a need for some unifying classes involving the field of interdisciplinary studies. Therefore, it would be useful to add a small number of required classes for DIS majors based around interdisciplinary studies, such as "Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies." Such courses would allow for formative program assessment rather than solely relying on summative assessment of the thesis defense of the students. The assessment report would then have to take these courses into consideration for data collection.

Retention and Time to Degree Completion

One of the strengths of the DIS program is its simplified structure that requires students to take 90 credits of courses across three disciplines along with 30 credits of core courses. There is nothing inherent to the program that prevents students from completing on time. However, the nature of the students interested in the program is such that they often take more courses

than required to enhance their interdisciplinarity. Along those same lines, many of the students are double majors and the extra courses required for that adds to their time to degree. However, there was a structural obstacle outside the major that prevented a few students from graduating in a timely fashion. Several DIS students reported difficulty accessing courses at MSU that were essential in helping them complete their projects. These students were able to take these courses at other universities, which is good, but DIS students should not have to take courses at the University of Montana when those same courses are offered at MSU. Some students would declare a second major so that they would have access to the courses and then drop the second major once the courses were taken, however this work-around is somewhat disingenuous. This lack of access to courses has led to an increased completion time for a few students, which is in opposition to MSU's strategic goal 1.1. DIS students should have access to all available courses at MSU and should be allowed to take any classes approved by their faculty advisory committees.

In terms of retention, the students who have left the program did not leave MSU. Instead, they moved into another MSU degree program, generally in one of the disciplines they have been using for the DIS degree. Given the rigorous nature of the program, it is not surprising that some students get to a point where they feel they will not be able to finish their projects. Any attempts to reduce the difficulty of the degree, however, would detract from the program's unique value.

DIS Coursework Planning Requirements and Institutional Course Scheduling

The unpredictability of course offerings has made it difficult for some DIS students to stick with their original three-year plans. Students either had to (1) keep close eyes on when certain courses were being sporadically offered, (2) work with their faculty advisory committee to change the student's course planning, or (3) had to extend their time to graduation. This unpredictability has led to some motivational challenges and anxiety for DIS students. However, these scheduling issues can be solved by building in some flexibility at the time when students create their initial degree plan. Instead of creating a tightly focused set of courses in their three disciplines, the students could list several course options in advance within each discipline that would fulfill the unit requirements. Rather than relying on the scheduling vagaries of a single course and re-adjusting their entire course plan, the students could easily adjust by taking an alternative course on their plan. This built-in flexibility would tend to greatly reduce student anxiety and may help retain those students who would have otherwise chosen another MSU degree. Another aspect of course planning and resources could involve closer communication between the DIS Program and MSU departments/colleges. Students' programs of study are set in motion after freshman year. This long-term structure gives departments/colleges time to plan for possible resource needs, but only if the programs of study are communicated. In programs where there are constrained resources, such planning could help alleviate some of the impact felt when additional students appear in key courses within those programs.

Increasing the Visibility of Work Completed by DIS Students.

The work of DIS majors is already relatively visible at MSU from an outward facing perspective. MSU has consistently used DIS student successes on the front page of its

website and in its marketing. These students do work that has impact and they often serve as de facto ambassadors for MSU. In terms of internal visibility, it would be useful for the students to be more fully integrated into their “home” department so that their successes could also be tied to those departments. Otherwise, the departments do not have much incentive to recognize or publicize the success of the DIS students.

Increasing Connectedness Among DIS students.

There have been some changes since the re-introduction of the major in 2015 that have increased student connectedness including monthly get togethers. The move to provide each DIS major with a “home” department has improved students’ sense of belonging, but several students have been left out of communications from these departments to their majors due to the way in which some of the sympla listservs are generated. This has meant that some DIS students were not receiving even basic information from the university because these messages were being relayed through departments to their majors. Students who were double majors did not run into this issue because they were officially included in their second home department’s listserv. It would be beneficial, then, to make sure that DIS students were more fully incorporated into their home departments and, especially, that they were included in important messages sent to their department’s majors. Similarly, scholarships and undergraduate grant funding are available to MSU students and are often tied to specific departments. DIS students are at a disadvantage due to their separation from departments and colleges.

As mentioned above, one recommendation for increasing student connectedness would be to introduce some courses grounded in the field of interdisciplinary studies. These courses would also provide DIS students with a shared intellectual foundation that will help them to design and complete interdisciplinary projects. These courses could include a short series including “Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies,” “Theories in Interdisciplinary Studies,” and “Research Methods in Interdisciplinary Studies.” Having a set of beginning, intermediate and advanced interdisciplinary courses would also bring the students together in each year of the degree. These courses could be integrated into the Core 2.0 curriculum so that they do not add to the 120-credit requirement.

Role Definition for the Director of the DIS Program

The role of the DIS Director is currently undefined in the job description and under supported in terms of resources given how many duties are required of the Director. Because the program is highly selective the Director undertakes a significant amount of work that is not reflected in the student numbers for the program. The Director reviews every student application for the major including each student’s proposed project and then interviews each applicant. This requires a significant amount of work, especially since a substantial number of these applicants are not admitted into the program. The Director also serves as an advisor for all DIS students by helping the students choose courses and facilitating student access to courses. The Director also serves as a central advisor on all the student projects, and the Honors College provides campus-wide resources and academically rigorous advising. Because DIS students pursue novel projects and academic areas beyond the scope of typical students and support structures, the mentoring and advising load is more akin to mentoring

graduate students. This amount of work is significantly more than the approximately 0.1 FTE given for this position and most of this work is not mentioned in the current job description. It would be beneficial for the program for the Director to have a defined position where at least 50% of the position is designated for the DIS program. The DIS major is an efficient major because the courses that each student takes are taught through other departments. So, the only major faculty resource required by the program is the Director.

Other Weaknesses and Unrealized Opportunities

The ideal size of the DIS program would be thirty students. Any larger would dilute the quality of the students coming into the program. Based on anecdotal observations of current DIS students and the Director, there is a population of students who discover the program past the time by which they would have needed to apply. If the program numbers are to be increased, it should be done with care to accommodate other highly motivated students whose ambitions are constrained by a disciplinary focus. The limiting factors for this minimal expansion are the access to faculty committee members and the time of the Director to coordinate these additional students. There would be no concern about the program growing too large since the entry requirements for the major are stringent and the timeframe for applying is limited to a student's early college years.

One other modification to the students' course planning that could enhance the major would be to allow some flexibility in the distribution of courses across the three disciplines. Currently DIS students are required to take 18 upper division credits in each of their three chosen disciplines (54 credits total across the three disciplines). But there are likely to be cases when a student might benefit from the ability to take an extra course or two in one of the disciplines rather than an equal number across the three disciplines. Therefore, it would be advantageous to allow students some flexibility in how many credits they take for each major. For example, students might be required to take 15 credits of upper division courses in each discipline and, then, they could have 9 credits of courses that could be distributed across the three in a manner that makes more sense for each student's project. There would still be a total of 54 credits of upper division courses required across three disciplines, but it would also give the students the ability to take courses that are most beneficial to their project. Such flexibility might also allow some students to apply for the DIS degree as sophomores. As currently constructed, the degree requirements make it very difficult for a student to transfer in after their freshman year. With this type of flexibility, a student should be able to finish the degree in four years if they transferred into the DIS program early in their sophomore year.

The work to select and mentor DIS students does not appear on the job description(s) for anyone at MSU, but rather falls upon the Honors College Dean and Assistant Dean. In addition to making the DIS Program Director a 0.5 FTE position, the DIS Program could enter a formal (or informal) partnership with the College of Education, Health and Human Development through which graduate students with an interest in higher education could supplement the efforts of the DIS Director and earn credits toward their degree programs through a graduate assistantship. These students could also be given a title such as DIS Program Assistant Director, which would bolster their resumes and enhance their prospects in the job market.

Rather than have multiple one-on-one advising meetings with students about program mechanics, it may be possible to produce a video or series of videos that explain different aspects of the DIS Program from general requirements for application to the Program, to more detailed discussions for students such as how to design a program of study, how to apply for grants and scholarships, and annual checklists advising students where they should be in their program of study. For faculty, a video explaining what a faculty member should expect who is considering a student request to be a DIS faculty advisor.

We suggest more close communication between the DIS Program and MSU departments/ colleges. Students' programs of study are set in motion after freshman year. This long-term structure gives departments/colleges time to plan for possible resource needs, but only if the programs of study are communicated.

Entrepreneurship is an obvious and important application of interdisciplinary studies leading to the creation of a potential business. High-achieving high school students interested in entrepreneurship is another population toward which DIS Program marketing efforts could be targeted. Programs of study that include one or more STEM departments and the Jake Jobs College of Business's entrepreneurship program could potentially address multiple aspects of MSU's Strategic Plan Goal 2.1. Greater integration between the DIS Program and the Jobs College could streamline student applications into the Program and with the Jobs curriculum.

The MSU DIS degree program meets the needs of highly motivated, emotionally mature students and produces high-impact students and high-impact graduates. While the program seems to be well-functioning, we believe that by implementing our recommendations the program will better meet the needs of and increase the diversity of its students, and allow more high-impact students to complete the DIS degree at MSU.