

Report on the Individualized Major Program Conference
University of Indiana (Bloomington)
March 1-2, 2012
Prepared by Steve Lane

This conference was recommended to me by some colleagues who had heard of the University of Indiana's reputation with their Individualized Major Program (IMP), and because of my role in reviewing undergraduate curriculum, I figured it would be good to go.

First of all, the pre-reading for the conference was interesting, but very demanding, and it was specifically on *interdisciplinarity*: defining it, varieties of it, approaches to it. I did more reading on the subject for this conference than I had ever done.

This led me to realize a first "identity problem" at the conference: were individualized majors intended to be interdisciplinary? It certainly appeared that a significant proportion of participants believed that an IMP (or their school's equivalent) was a way to promote inter- and multidisciplinary study in an institution built primarily around disciplinary structures. In fact, some participating schools were embarked on projects that I would describe more like introducing learning communities or new degree combinations to their schools.

As I learned more about the participating universities, another of these "identity problems" quickly became apparent: IMPs and General Studies were two very different camps serving two very different needs:

- A) A degree program driven by the student, who was highly motivated and very capable, who had to put together a coherent proposal that built a program that did not exist; in this category, an IMP was aimed more at an Honours-type of student, and, in fact, some IMPs were administered by the school's Honours College. The host school's IMP was the exemplar of this approach.
- B) The second major category was the Bachelor of General Studies approach, and according to these participants, students came here as a last (or near-last) resort; in other words, this approach sounded more like a student success option, where students who were struggling to meet one or another degree requirement switched to a degree that they designed with an advisor.

As I left the conference, I had one approach, the former, in mind. It seemed to me that we do have a few highly motivated students at VIU, who often are engaged in different courses of study than those in departments (or putting together double Majors, triple Minors, and the like). Further, it was pointed out at the conference that IMPs can function as "incubators" of new programs, departments, or even (inter)disciplines, and I found that idea appealing – rather than wait until a distinct program in something new is proposed, approved and resourced, provide a

structure for students to build it in the meantime, and monitor its attractiveness to students.

Recommendation 1: *That as Honours program proposals emerge from some departments, VIU consider an Individualized Major Program for highly motivated, creative students, and as a potential incubator of new programs.*

This is not to say that the Bachelor of General Studies approach should not be considered, as well, but for reasons that have come clear to me since the IMP Conference. There are demands, in particular at the regional campuses, for such a degree structure, which would provide flexibility and mobility to students who otherwise may have difficulty completing a degree, given the lack of certainty around course offerings. Further, such a degree might facilitate partnerships between VIU and the Island colleges (Camosun and NIC), with course offerings from other sites and other institutions counting as credit towards degree completion.

Recommendation 2: *That a further consideration be a Bachelor of General Studies, or a BA, General Studies, to address the needs of specific populations of students, such as those studying at our regional campuses.*