An Action Plan for the
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS)
Graduate Program

The Graduate School
Oregon State University

September 2013

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Introduction

The Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS) program has undergone a comprehensive review in 2013. As a result of this review, which has included the preparation of a self-study and an on-site review, the MAIS program has been provided with a number of recommendations to strengthen the program.

The review panel has recommended the following:

1. Expand the focus of the MAIS beyond the College of Liberal Arts, possibly including serving as an incubator for new interdisciplinary graduate programs, and increasing the Director appointment to .5 FTE or adding a Co-Director from STEM disciplines.
2. Rebrand and market the MAIS to attract top applicants and bolster the program’s reputation.
3. Consider adding a writing requirement for applicants, and perhaps using GRE or GMAT scores.
4. Continue core MAIS courses and add a third on research methods.
5. Add a required research colloquium series for 2nd year students, either in addition to or in lieu of a third required core course.
6. Develop “tracks” in disciplines that cohorts could take together.
7. Establish one or two admissions cycles instead of continuing rolling admissions.
8. Require the same number of credits in each area of study.
9. Consider requiring an appendix to every thesis or project that provides an account of how interdisciplinary scholarship was achieved.
10. Develop a handbook for MAIS faculty and advisors.
11. Provide a “home” for MAIS students either in the form of a physical space or continuation of IST courses into the 2nd year.
12. Track information on students in a way that is accessible to departments and faculty.

These recommendations, along with the discussion of the MAIS program in the full report, all point to several broad objectives, which can be characterized as such:

A. Broaden the appeal of the MAIS beyond the College of Liberal Arts
B. Achieve a greater sense of interdisciplinarity in students’ work and their identity on campus
C. Clarify the roles, responsibilities and opportunities for students and faculty
D. Improve program administration
E. Enhance the reputation of the program
In order to achieve these outcomes, the MAIS program proposes to take action on several fronts. These action items are discussed below, and they include concrete steps to be taken, along with a timeframe for their implementation. Though these are broken down according to the objectives listed above, many of these changes will serve the attainment of more than one of the stated objectives.

**Action Plan**

A. Broaden the appeal of the MAIS (Recommendations 1 and 6)

A.1

*Goal: Develop “tracks” or groups of courses/fields that work well together.*

Such frameworks can broaden the appeal of the program by highlighting programs and departments that are not commonly used in the MAIS, along with those that are more commonly used. Trends that are emerging in academic research, such as human-technology interactions, or relations between humans and the built environment, can weave together fields in the social sciences and humanities with fields in the sciences, mathematics and engineering. Another possibility suggested by the review panel is a track to fulfill requirements for teaching in Northwest Community Colleges.

*Action Item:* The MAIS program will develop at least two “tracks” per year over each of the next two academic years. This will involve working in coordination with multiple departments and programs, with emphasis on those that have low participation in the MAIS. This will include the development of sample programs of study, and a featured web presence of these options.

*Metric:* The first proposed track will be developed by the end of winter term 2014, and the second one by the end of spring term 2014. A similar schedule will be followed in winter and spring of 2015 to complete a total of four tracks. New tracks will subsequently be added as the opportunity and need arises.

A.2

*Goal: Engage in outreach to programs beyond those that are already well-subscribed by MAIS students.*

Expansion of MAIS participation across campus will require outreach and cultivation. To that end, the MAIS Director and the faculty who serve on the admissions committee/advisory group will need to engage faculty, graduate advisors and administrators throughout campus.

*Action Item and Metric:* MAIS program representatives will hold a minimum of three meetings per term with faculty, chairs and directors over the next two academic years. They will target programs that have been attractive to MAIS applicants and students, but unavailable or minimally used as fields of study.
A.3

Goal: Serve as an incubator for new interdisciplinary programs at OSU.
The process of developing new degree programs at OSU is labor and time intensive, requiring the
development of a Category I proposal and a comprehensive approval process. In addition to providing
an interdisciplinary degree in the form of the MAIS, Interdisciplinary Programs in the Graduate School
can potentially add a new function, that of housing proposed new interdisciplinary programs in order to
test their feasibility. This can allow faculty and students to engage interdisciplinary projects earlier than
could otherwise be achieved, while testing whether a program can be sustainable. This is an ambitious
goal, and will require careful study and coordination to determine administrative needs and funding
mechanisms, along with potential interest across campus and a suitable initial test case.

Action Item: The MAIS program will study this option and provide a report to the Dean and Associate
Dean of the Graduate School. This report will consider the opportunities and barriers to this proposal,
along with recommendations and a plan for moving forward if the proposal is deemed feasible.

Metric: The report will be provided to the Dean and Associate Dean of the Graduate School by
December 2014.

One additional recommendation from the review panel was to consider expanding the appointment of
the MAIS Director to .5 FTE, or to add a co-director from one of the STEM disciplines, to allow for
broader program outreach, appeal and participation. It is uncommon to have Co-Directors for graduate
programs, due to cost and feasibility of management. Moreover, since the MAIS has no faculty or
facilities of its own, and only two courses it offers, employing two directors seems unnecessary,
especially in comparison to other programs on campus. Expansion of the Director’s appointment to .5
FTE could make sense if responsibility expands to include the development and supervision of an
incubator type of program. However, with the current level of responsibility, the .25 FTE seems both
reasonable and consistent (or better) than the level of FTE provided to other program directors on
campus whose appointments include teaching, research, service and administration.

B. Achieve greater sense of interdisciplinarity in students’ work and their identity on campus
(Recommendations 4, 5, 8, 9 and 11)

B.1

Goal: Revise and expand core curriculum.
The MAIS program currently requires two courses, totaling 4 credit hours. The review panel
recommended that additional attention be paid to research methods and interdisciplinarity in these
courses, as well as an expansion of course requirements. An appropriate way to initiate this is to add a
1-credit research colloquium for students in the second year to present their research to fellow students, as well as faculty. (The MAIS already holds one or two of these types of sessions a year, but they are voluntary and few in number.) This would allow presenters to gain feedback and suggestions on their research and writing. It would also help to develop a sense of cohort among MAIS students, as added meetings throughout the entire degree program can serve in lieu of a physical space to help create a “home” for MAIS students. A colloquium can also serve to broaden program appeal by sharing interdisciplinary research and demonstrating the potential of the program to faculty across campus.

**Action Item**: The MAIS program will develop a required 1-credit research colloquium course for 2nd year MAIS students, and will complete the Category II approval process.

**Action Item**: The content and scheduling of IST 511 and 512 will be reviewed to ensure sufficient attention to diverse research methods, and to ensure optimal timing of the courses, as well as frequency of class meetings. Changes will be implemented in the current academic year.

**Metrics**: Completion of the Category II process for the new MAIS course will be done no later than the spring of 2014. The new course will be offered (and required of students) starting with those entering the MAIS program during the 2014-15 academic year.

**B.2**

**Goal**: Revise requirements for the program of study and thesis/project to promote interdisciplinarity. Currently, the MAIS program requires a minimum of 9 credits in each field of study and a maximum of 21 credits. The panel recommended making a change so that an equal number of credits is required in each field of study. While requiring full equality among fields may not be attainable (due to varying course credits among classes and departments, as well as course availability), diminishing the lower and upper limits to 12 minimum/18 maximum would help to achieve the goal. In addition, the panel recommended adding a requirement that each thesis/project include an appendix explaining how the student achieved interdisciplinary scholarship. This would also help to bolster the program and the work of the students.

**Action Item**: The MAIS Director will consult with the program’s stakeholders (the Dean and Associate Dean, the admissions/advisory group, faculty, graduate advisors, and students), to determine the support, appropriateness and feasibility of pursuing these two changes.

**Metrics**: A decision regarding adoption of these two proposals will be reached by the summer term 2014, and any changes to be made will be implemented no later than the end of fall term 2014.

**C. Clarify the roles and responsibilities for students and faculty (Recommendation 10)**
Goal: Revise the MAIS website and forms.
Meeting this objective is a communications-oriented task. It includes building on the work that is done on a periodic basis to improve the clarity and sometimes the scope of various MAIS documents, particularly the MAIS website. Some specific ideas of new materials from the review committee include a handbook for faculty to clarify their roles and responsibilities; information on new “tracks,” with sample programs of study; and a fact sheet for students to help them communicate about their work and their degree to prospective employers. Other useful ideas suggested are an FAQ section for applicants, students, faculty and administrators; and profiles of a few “success stories” from the program. All of these would be enhancements to the MAIS website, and some may be available as hard copies as well. Taking these steps will also serve the goal of improving the coordination and consistency among departments and programs, which was discussed by the review panel, but not added as a formal recommendation.

Action Item: The MAIS program will review and revise its website, and will develop new materials to ensure that all program stakeholders can 1) better understand and communicate their roles and responsibilities; and 2) maintain a clear understanding about program goals, rules and procedures.

Metric: A first round of revisions to the MAIS website will be completed by January 2014, though the process will be an ongoing one. A student fact sheet will be completed by the end of spring 2014, and a faculty handbook will be ready for use starting in the fall of 2014.

D. Improve program administration (Recommendations 7 and 12)

D.1

Goal: Simplify and streamline the admissions process.
The MAIS Director, the review panel, and the graduate advisors of programs participating in the MAIS all agree that the admissions process should be changed. Instead of having rolling admissions, the program should establish one or two admissions cycles. The MAIS will therefore establish a single admissions cycle. Applications will be due March 1 of each year, and admissions decisions will be communicated to applicants no later than April 1. (Some exceptions may be made on a case-by-case basis as warranted.) An expanded and clarified explanation of application process will be substituted for the current webpage, as per the review panel’s recommendation.

Action Item: The MAIS program will implement the admissions cycle change in the current year. The Director will revise all materials to clearly explain the new timeline and admissions process, and will work closely with staff in the Graduate School and advisors in participating programs to ensure that all stakeholders fully understand the process to be adopted. It should be noted that the program will phase
in this change, allowing applications to be submitted for the winter 2014 term, so as not to abruptly change the requirements for applicants who may have been planning to submit applications for the winter 2014 term.

*Metric:* This change is to be implemented right away, and all communications and web postings will be completed by the end of October 2013.

**D.2**

*Goal: Improve information management.*
The MAIS program needs to make better use of the limited administrative support it gets each year. In particular, the program has to systematize the collection and management of information about students (e.g., fields of study, enrollment status) so that information is readily available to not only the Director, but to faculty advisors as well.

*Action Item:* The MAIS Director will work with the administrative staff person supporting the MAIS to develop a plan for acquiring and distributing information about MAIS students (and the program in general) on a regular basis. The Director will consult with the MAIS admissions/advisory group (and the Associate Dean of the Graduate School as required) to receive recommendations about the type of data that needs to be compiled, the frequency with which it should be compiled and distributed, and who should receive it (or have access to it, depending upon the process used).

*Metric:* A schedule of the information to be collected and its distribution will be developed during the fall term of 2013. The plan that is developed will be implemented in the winter of 2014.

**E. Enhance the program’s reputation (Recommendations 2 and 3)**

**E.1**

*Goal: Raise the bar regarding admissions selectivity (without sacrificing diversity).*
There is an understanding among some programs and faculty on campus that MAIS students tend to be weaker than those in disciplinary programs, or that the program provides a fallback for students not accepted into other programs. The MAIS program has at times been willing to take a chance on some students whose academic records might preclude them from other programs (with mixed results), though it has long since stopped admitting students who have done poorly in other OSU graduate programs. In addition, there is no GRE requirement for admission, nor is a writing sample beyond the statement of objectives required. At the same time, there is widespread support among committed MAIS faculty that the program serves a diverse body of students very well, and that MAIS students go on from the program to a variety of successful careers. Since participation in the MAIS depends upon the
ongoing support of faculty, the program Director will be certain to develop any changes to admissions requirements in consultation with key stakeholders.

*Action Item:* As part of the consultation process discussed in item B.2, the MAIS Director will consult with the program’s stakeholders to determine what types of changes should be made regarding admissions requirements and selectivity.

*Metric:* A decision regarding admissions changes will be reached by summer term 2014 (concurrent with the process described in B.2), and any changes to be made will be implemented in the admission cycle in the following academic year.

### E.2

**Goal:** Rebrand the program and market it as a dynamic driver of creativity.

The rebranding and marketing of the program to bolster its reputation is a longer term goal, and one that will be served by successful implementation of all the other recommendations. At the same time, there are some specific actions that can be taken right away in communicating the opportunities available to students and faculty, and in highlighting the program’s success stories.

*Action Item:* The MAIS Director will solicit ideas for student “success stories” on an ongoing basis and develop brief profiles of 3-5 stories to be highlighted on the website. This will be part of the larger effort of revising the website to highlight the opportunities and benefits that come from a degree in interdisciplinary studies (along with requirements, responsibilities, etc.). Communication of these successes in face-to-face meetings will also be helpful in broadening the appeal of the program across campus.

*Metric:* Consistent with Item C, the first round of revisions to the MAIS website will be completed by January 2014, and this will include the first success story. At least two additional profiles will be added by the summer of 2014. After that, new profiles will be added as deemed appropriate.
Action Plan Schedule

All of the action items described above will be completed on the following schedule.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Action Items</th>
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| Fall 2013     | Hold three outreach meetings  
|               | Revise website – include one success story  
|               | Change admissions process to once-a-year  
|               | Develop plan to collect and distribute program/student information                                                                         |
| Winter 2014   | Hold three outreach meetings  
|               | Develop one program “track”  
|               | Begin collection and distribution of program/student information                                                                         |
| Spring 2014   | Hold three outreach meetings  
|               | Develop one program “track”  
|               | Complete Category II for new class  
|               | Complete student fact sheet                                                                                                               |
| Summer 2014   | Complete faculty handbook  
|               | Add two success stories to website  
|               | Reach decisions on credit distribution, adding appendix to thesis/project, and admissions requirements                                      |
| Fall 2014     | Hold three outreach meetings  
|               | Offer new class  
|               | Submit report on feasibility of incubator role for interdisciplinary programs                                                                |
| Winter 2015   | Hold three outreach meetings  
|               | Develop one program “track”                                                                                                               |
| Spring 2015   | Hold three outreach meetings  
|               | Develop one program “track”                                                                                                               |

A Note on Program Finances

The review panel suggested the possible need for additional financial support, for both administration and GRA/GTA positions. This is, of course, a common theme regarding academic programs, as they can almost always expand/improve/do more, and additional funding helps to achieve such aims. At the same time, such support is not always available, and programs often need to rely on additional funding streams to either maintain or expand services.

With respect to the MAIS, it is not a costly program, with a budget of about $45,000 annually, while graduating about 20 students per year. As the self-study revealed, these students tend to see great
value in their education, and they have gone on to diverse and productive careers. Still, the MAIS can be more entrepreneurial with regard to funding. Two potential sources of funding within OSU include INTO and E-campus, and a third, which extends beyond campus, involves soliciting donations from alumni.

The MAIS Director has explored the possibility of working with INTO in the past, though no action was pursued at the time. The MAIS admissions process, which requires approval from multiple departments, has been considered too slow and cumbersome for INTO, which wanted decisions to be communicated within one week of receipt of applications. It is possible that changes in the admissions process can offer an opportunity to work with INTO. To that end, the MAIS Director will initiate a dialogue with INTO in the current academic year to explore the possibility of an MAIS “Pathway” for international students.

Pursuit of an additional funding stream via E-campus is another option, though some barriers exist. The MAIS offers only two (and soon three) courses, while all other student credit hours come from departments and programs across campus. It would be inappropriate to offer these required courses through E-campus, since the MAIS is not an online degree, and the courses require students to be present on campus. Nor does it seem feasible to suggest revenue sharing with departments benefitting financially from MAIS students enrolled in their E-campus courses. This would serve as a disincentive to participation in the MAIS program at a time when it is seeking greater participation. Nonetheless, engaging in a discussion with E-campus can shed light on potential opportunities. Therefore, the MAIS Director will meet with representatives in the current academic year from E-campus to explore available options.

Lastly, there is a possibility of soliciting donations from MAIS alumni. The OSU Foundation has been working successfully with colleges and programs across campus for many years to develop new sources of financial support. The MAIS should be no different from these other programs. The MAIS Director will initiate a process for engaging the OSU Foundation (this will start with a conversation with the Dean of the Graduate School), so that the MAIS program can begin to emulate the fundraising success that many other programs at OSU have already achieved.