Review Panel Report for the Graduate School

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies
Oregon State University

Reviewers:

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On-site Review Dates:

May 29 – 30, 2013
Overall Recommendation:

The MAIS program should be maintained but should update its mission statement, enhance its reputation on campus, and strive to overcome challenges inherent with interdisciplinary academic programs.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations:

The MAIS program self-identifies as fulfilling an institutional need to promote synthesis across the university’s diverse range of disciplines. The committee concurs; many MAIS students capitalize on the opportunity to conduct truly interdisciplinary work that leads to scholarly outputs unlikely to be realized in the absence of the MAIS program. Increasing the number of disciplines that actively participate in the program would position it to meet the institutional need for interdisciplinary scholarship more fully. Most active disciplines are in the College of Liberal Arts, so the extent to which many students’ scholarship is truly interdisciplinary is debatable. Some students have used the MAIS to substitute for the lack of degree programs in certain disciplines. Some other students come to MAIS after being declined admission to other programs. This contributes to a lingering thought somewhat diminishing reputation of the program as consisting of relatively weak students. Development of new programs in certain disciplines that have been a source of students for MAIS in the past is a threat to the program but also demonstrates a new way to view the MAIS, as an incubator or testing ground for new programs.

Recommendations

1. MAIS should expand with a deliberate focus beyond the College of Liberal Arts and update its mission statement to include a vision as serving the campus as an incubator for novel graduate programs. Significant expansion should be accompanied by either an increase in the FTE of the current director or the addition of a co-director, possibly from a STEM discipline. A total FTE commitment of 0.5 to directorship would allow for expansion.
2. Rebrand and market the program to attract the best possible applicants and to bolster the program’s reputation on campus. Sell the program as a dynamic driver of creativity by highlighting student success stories on the program’s web site.
3. Consider a minimum writing/verbal requirement for all applicants, perhaps by using GRE or GMAT scores as an indicator.
4. Continue the two courses designed for and required of MAIS students. Consider whether these classes could be scheduled such that MAIS students come together more frequently during their degree programs. Develop a third
core course that would focus on research methodologies and perhaps on communication to academic peers.

5. Either instead of or in addition to the third class proposed in recommendation 4, develop a colloquium series required of all MAIS students where research results are presented. This would continue the sense of a cohort among students and share the nature of interdisciplinary research on campus. Colloquia could be set on departmental schedules such that faculty from various departments could attend to see the type of interdisciplinary research in their area that is supported by the MAIS program. This might be used as a vehicle to recruit faculty for participation in the program.

6. Explore the creation of tracks, groups of classes in three disciplines that cohorts of students would take together. These tracks would identify a few core courses that would be available in the discipline, and the required prerequisites needed for those courses. Some disciplines offer graduate-level courses that could serve as prerequisite coursework. Developing tracks in these disciplines, which include public health and business, might make it easier for students to pursue interdisciplinary topics.

7. Establish one, or possibly two, admission cycles with clearly advertised deadlines for exactly what, how, and where to submit application materials.

8. Update the program of study form to show that students need to take the same number of credits in each of the three disciplines. Clarify which programs participate in the MAIS program on line and in the graduate catalog.

9. Consider requiring that all MAIS students who prepare a thesis have an appendix that provides the student’s personal account of how he or she achieved interdisciplinary scholarship. Such statements could be viewed as persuasive arguments to defend against claims of disciplinary work being done by MAIS students.

10. A handbook should be developed for advisors in the MAIS program to delineate policies and to provide guidance.

11. Provide a “home” base for MAIS students, either in the form of a common space (lounge or study/discussion room) or continuance of IST courses into the second year to engage research and writing and to allow for the sense of a cohort among students. Some students said that IST512 might be more helpful later in the degree program.

12. Track the disciplinary areas of each MAIS student in Banner or via another system that is accessible to departments and faculty.

**Detailed Findings:**

**Introduction**

This review was the second of the MAIS program that included external reviewers. The self-study document included a summary of the
recommendations of the first review, conducted in 2002, and how the program responded to those recommendations.

The present review team was asked to evaluate the role of the MAIS in the context of new graduate programs that have been approved recently at Oregon State. Some of these new programs are in disciplines that historically have lacked graduate programs, which led students to pursue the MAIS due to the paucity of other options. The MAIS program and Graduate School are to be commended for the thoughtful self-study document that was prepared; survey data included in the document were particularly useful and appreciated. The review team was asked by the Graduate School to consider whether and how the MAIS program should expand, whether a new degree (master of interdisciplinary studies) should be offered, how the Cascades campus might factor into the future of the MAIS, and how the two current ITS courses might be changed to benefit the program and strengthen graduate studies more broadly.

The reviewers are grateful to the Program Director, the Dean and Associate Dean of the Graduate School, and the students and faculty participants in the MAIS. Their contributions to the self-study and the time they took to meet with the reviewers during the site visit were extremely helpful.

Inputs

Mission of the program and relationship to the institutional mission

The self-study states that supporting the mission of the university “…requires a graduate study option that allows for and promotes synthesis of knowledge across the university’s diverse range of academic departments. This is the primary purpose of the MAIS program in providing options for graduate study that integrate three academic disciplines.” The university mission also emphasizes academic excellence in the three signature areas: advancing the science of sustainable Earth ecosystems; improving human health and wellness; and promoting economic growth and social progress.

The MAIS program has evolved such that it predominately supports only a few of the academic departments of the university, notably departments within the College of Liberal Arts where discipline-specific graduate programs are newly formed or under development. Consequently, the MAIS program does not appear to meet its own stated mission. Some students are pursuing true interdisciplinary studies, but many are using the program as a substitute degree.

To serve as an incubator for new interdisciplinary degree programs is a legitimate function within the university; this is a mission that MAIS could embrace and celebrate. To do so, the program must expand beyond the College of Liberal Arts and should strongly consider offering the degree master of science with an
accompanying program name change to increase compatibility with STEM disciplines.

MAIS should not be the fall back degree for students who would prefer to be in other programs. It should serve the unique niche in which students have flexibility to integrate multiple disciplines in truly interdisciplinary scholarship. Under the current director, the program has made progress in this area.

Another potential role for the program is to help students fulfill requirements for teaching in Northwest Community Colleges. Program leadership should explore this possibility by confirming the coursework and/or graduate degrees to be required by the community colleges.

One student mentioned the MAIS program attracts many older, returning students who may be looking to continue their education, but are not necessarily interested in pursuing a content-specific degree leading to employment in a specific field. Expanding the program to offer traditional, online, or hybrid courses at an off-site location such as the Cascade campus would increase access for more of these “non-traditional” students. Graduate programs not currently participating in the MAIS, such as public health, might be included through this expansion.

**Quality of students**
Representatives from multiple academic units mentioned that quality of students limits participation in the program. Some MAIS students are perceived as lacking adequate background and prerequisite knowledge needed to gain access to classes. Another issue is lack of focus. Students who know what they want to do and how the different disciplines will integrate to support that purpose excel by being self-directed and by taking advantage of the interdisciplinary nature of the program. Students with less certainty of their direction may flounder and plan without a real sense of how the various classes will integrate to support their scholarship. There was a noted perception that some students pursue this degree as an alternate to more competitive programs. Within those competitive disciplines, MAIS students are identified as weaker in writing, development of ideas, and overall methodology. At least one interviewee expressed gratitude that MAIS is willing to partner with the ethnic studies program to provide academic homes for students from underrepresented populations with relatively weak language skills. This bi-modal distribution in the quality of the students also contributes to the perceptions of low quality of the overall program.

**Admissions Selectivity**
Admissions processes need to be clarified. The web site does not describe the application process clearly, nor does it highlight the need for an academic advisor in each disciplinary area of a degree program. Confusion was evident among
faculty, probably because departments use different processes for evaluating MAIS candidates. While the process of rolling admission has advantages, cons outweigh benefits. An overarching disadvantage of rolling admission is that it results in frustration for applicants and university personnel because of the complexity of requiring separate evaluations from each discipline as well as the Graduate School. Students also voiced frustration with the lack of clarity about what must be submitted where and about how to find help with planning an integrated program of study that involves three disciplines. Which disciplines are options for use in an MAIS program also was reported to be unclear.

Overall, the committee perceived that admissions selectivity has increased over the past several years. This has improved the regard for the MAIS program on campus. Nonetheless, a tension remains. Some stakeholders clearly want to see admissions standards continue to increase while others voiced the need to serve promising students who would be denied by other programs on campus. Similarly, the program director was proud that the program had graduated “diamonds in the rough” and stated his willingness to accept students with relatively weak academic credentials if at least a subset of them can succeed.

**Financial support of students**

Several faculty members mentioned the need for increased MAIS funding via assistantships from the Graduate School. In addition, faculty felt the Graduate School should actively promote the program rather than passively allowing it.

**Curriculum Strength**

Some faculty members reported the lack of a robust interdisciplinary perspective in the program plans of some students. The perception is that students are focused in two areas (sometimes within the same academic department), and are merely filling in with available coursework in the third area.

**Quality of Personnel**

Expansion of the program into STEM and other disciplines where the master of science would be preferred over the master of arts may require increasing the current 0.25 FTE assigned to the director of the MAIS program. The present director is highly regarded and credited for recent improvements in MAIS. He and the Graduate School should consider whether it would be better to increase his FTE in the MAIS or to maintain his present commitment and seek the services of a second faculty member from a STEM discipline.

**Level and Quality of Infrastructure and Quality of Organizational Support**

The MAIS program has 0.25 FTE allocated to the director and approximately 0.2 FTE for an instructor of two required courses (IST 511, IST 512). The committee supports the model of the Graduate School administering the MAIS program rather than having it housed in a department. Administrative support is limited to
funds covering a few hours a week. Based on the self-study document and information provided during the site visit, it is apparent that the current director is providing excellent leadership and management. The MAIS graduate faculty comprises about 50 members from a broad range of departments and colleges, with most residing in the College of Liberal Arts. There are administrative challenges associated with coordinating and advising across three disciplines. The infrastructure is limited and relies heavily on individual departments’ willingness to provide space and resources for MAIS students. No space, equipment, or facilities are dedicated specifically or solely to either MAIS students or faculty members. Many students do not have a desk, and the lack of a “home” for each student is one of the issues brought up in the self-study document and site visit. No library holdings are specific to the MAIS program, but individual departments have library holdings.

Support from the Graduate School is good. And basing the program within the Graduate School makes it a university program vs. college-specific. However, some students do not have a real home. They typically associate with other graduate students in the department that is providing them the GTA funding or with other students of their major professor. It was noted that the two courses required of all MAIS students do result in the sense of a cohort for some students, but there was not much cohort interaction outside of those courses.

There needs to be a way to track the disciplinary areas of the students. The Banner system presently shows only that a student is pursuing the MAIS degree program; information about the pertinent disciplines within the program and the faculty advisors are not maintained. This information should be tracked and made available to departments and faculty.

Productivity

**Level and quality of student performance**

Based on the self-study document and on accounts provided during the site visit, many MAIS students capitalize on the opportunity to conduct truly interdisciplinary work. This leads to scholarly outputs unlikely to be realized in the absence of the MAIS program. Some faculty, however, perceive that some students in the program are not sufficiently integrating three disciplines and instead use the MAIS to substitute for disciplinary degree programs not offered at Oregon State. Therefore, the committee urges program leaders and faculty to attend to the need to integrate three disciplinary areas. One way that might be accomplished would be to require that all MAIS students who prepare a thesis have an appendix that provides the student’s personal account of how he or she achieved interdisciplinary scholarship. Such statements could be viewed as persuasive arguments to defend against claims of disciplinary work being done by MAIS students. Another approach would be to institute required annual
meetings (review sessions) of students with their faculty committees with the expectation that the committee would challenge the student to defend the extent to which their work to date has been interdisciplinary.

**Level and quality of faculty performance**
The MAIS benefits from the dedicated faculty who contribute to student learning. Participating faculty should be encouraged to promote the scholarship that they disseminate due to the projects of MAIS students. Few faculty with whom the review team met reported that they had published refereed papers with MAIS students. A database of papers, and other scholarly products, generated by MAIS students should be maintained and made available on the program’s website. Participating faculty also should distinguish scholarship related to the MAIS service they provide on their CVs used during evaluations and consideration for promotion and tenure.

**Visibility of scholarly community**
The decentralized nature of the program leads to the absence of a sense of belonging among students. Program leadership and the Graduate School should strive to identify ways to overcome this problem. Student cohorts could be created, along with a colloquium series, and a club or association for MAIS students. One of the required courses could be scheduled for students to take in the second year, and a physical space (lounge, etc.) where MAIS students could interact should be considered. These approaches could improve the esprit de corps of MAIS students while promoting the visibility of the program on campus.

**Outcomes**
Concerns exist that employers do not understand the meaning of a degree in interdisciplinary studies. Branding the program more deliberately will ease this problem as well as help with the recruitment of students, faculty, and departmental partners. The program should consider developing a concise fact sheet for students to use to inform employers about the degree program. Graduates appear to be viable in the job market but have the burden of needing to explain their academic credentials to employers.

Overall, students leave the program with a sense of satisfaction. Nonetheless, considerable frustration is associated with the application process and with feeling a sense of homelessness during their programs.

**Conclusion**
The MAIS program continues to serve the educational and discovery missions of Oregon State University, but its niche on campus is evolving rapidly. Since the last program review in 2002, significant change has occurred in the pallet of
graduate programs available at Oregon State, as well as in expectations for student quality and the amount of flexible time faculty members perceive they have to devote to a program outside of their disciplines. The MAIS program should be maintained but broadened through changes in its mission statement and in the location, number, and diversity of departments that participate.