

BIS/IDIM Alumni Survey

College of Liberal Arts

Summary Report

Summer 2001

Alumni of the Bachelor of Individualized Studies (BIS) degree program and the Individually Designed Interdepartmental Major (IDIM) program feel satisfied with the overall value of their individualized degree programs and would recommend the programs to current students, according to results of a recent survey.

In May 2000 the BIS/IDIM staff mailed a survey to all 529 CLA alums who graduated with a BIS or an IDIM between 1990 and 1999. One hundred ninety-five (37%) responded: 131 BIS and 63 IDIM graduates. The purpose of the survey was to gather information about what BIS/IDIM students have done after they leave the University and to learn how they evaluate their experiences in the individualized programs.

The grads answered the question “How would you rate the overall value of the BIS or IDIM to you personally?” with an average 1.8 on a scale of 1 (greatest value) to 5 (least value). In response to the question, “Would you recommend the BIS/IDIM program to a current undergraduate?” 70 percent said yes without qualification, and an additional 27 percent said they would recommend BIS or IDIM to students with certain characteristics, such as self-directedness. Only 2 percent said they would not recommend the programs.

	1 extremely valuable	2	3	4	5 not at all valuable
How would you rate the overall value of the BIS or IDIM for you personally?	X average = 1.83				
Would you recommend a BIS or IDIM to a current undergraduate?	Yes: 136 (70%) No: 4 (2%) Depends: 52 (27%)* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On whether student is willing to work hard and be self-directed • On whether the student has a clear sense of her/his goals • On whether the student has sought out existing programs and has determined that none is suitable 				

*Total does not add to 100% because not all respondents answered this question.

Moreover, the grads reported, on average, feeling that the BIS or IDIM had made a relatively significant personal impact on them.

	1 to a great degree	2	3	4	5 to a small degree
To what degree would you say the BIS/IDIM has made an impact on you <i>personally</i> – your values, interests, etc.?	X average = 2.13				

Many earn MA or MBA

Just over a quarter of the survey respondents reported having attended graduate school, with most of those having earned MAs and MBAs. Law degrees and Ph.D.s were also represented. Twenty-five percent of all BIS alumni responding and 38 percent of all IDIM alumni responding had earned a graduate degree of some kind.

Nineteen of the graduate degrees were from the University of Minnesota; 32 were from out-of-state institutions.

Fields of post-baccalaureate study varied widely, particularly for IDIM grads, who as a group held proportionally fewer professional degrees (e.g., law, management) than did BIS grads. Of those who earned graduate degrees, *IDIM grads were approximately 4 times as likely as BIS grads to study in a liberal arts discipline.*

Sales and teaching popular careers

More than half the respondents (53 percent) said they had worked in areas closely related to their BIS or IDIM programs. Only 17 percent said they had worked in unrelated fields.

The most common career fields among respondents were sales and education, with marketing, finance, communications, and human resources also well represented.

Most Common Areas of Work Experience

BIS	IDIM
Sales (20% of those reporting)	Education (16%)
Marketing (9%)	Sales (9%)
Finance (8%)	Marketing (7%)
Advertising (7%)	
Human Resources (6%)	

Most Common Current Career Fields

BIS	IDIM
Sales (13% of those reporting)	Education (11%)
Account Executive/Coordinator (9%)	Communications (6%)
Marketing (6%)	
Middle Management (6%)	

In regard to the relevance of the respondents' professional work to the areas of study in their BIS/IDIM programs, the majority said they had done work that was either "closely related" or "both related and unrelated."

How related in subject matter do you feel your BIS/IDIM program is to what you've done since graduation?	Number Checked (percentage of total)	BIS responses (as percentage of all BIS respondents)	IDIM responses (as percentage of all IDIM respondents)
Closely related	71 (36%)	37%	35%
I've done both related and unrelated things	61 (31%)	31%	33%

Somewhat related	39 (20%)	19%	22%
Unrelated	22 (11%)	12%	10%

Of those who felt their BIS/IDIM programs were unrelated to the work they had done, *twice as many said they felt content with them being unrelated as said they would have preferred that they be related.*

Employers “impressed”

Employers have typically responded positively to the BIS or IDIM degree, alumni reported.

Approximately half of those responding to a question about the reaction of prospective employers to the BIS or IDIM said they had received positive feedback, with about a quarter saying the degree hadn’t come up during job interviews. Less than one-tenth of respondents reported that prospective employers had expressed doubt about their degrees. A number of the grads reported that employers had been curious, but that this curiosity had opened the door to conversation about the unique and demanding qualities of the degree.

One respondent, for instance, wrote, “A lot of people don’t know . . . what [the degree] is at first. When I’ve explained, most people are impressed In interviews, this gives you the opportunity to stand out.” Wrote another respondent, “[Prospective employers] are amazed at the amount of dedication and commitment you have to achieving your goals.” Yet another noted that telling interviewers about the degree’s focus “prompts an inquiry and gives you a chance to sell yourself.”

Answers to the question “How have prospective employers responded to your BIS or IDIM degree?” fell into the following categories:

Answer	Number of people offering this answer	BIS (as % of all BIS respondents)	IDIM (as % of all IDIM respondents)
Employers have responded positively/ They responded positively after I explained the degree.	87 (45% of total)	44%	47%
It hasn’t come up as an issue/Employers have had neutral feelings about it.	41 (21% of total)	19%	25%
Employers don’t know what it is.	16 (8% of total)	10%	5%
Employers are skeptical about it.	14 (7% of total)	9%	3%

Note: percentages do not add to 100 because not all respondents answered this question and because this is not an exhaustive list of answers provided; remaining answers did not easily cluster into categories.

Independent, critical thinking honed

When asked what skills and knowledge they felt they had gained through the BIS/IDIM program, respondents overwhelmingly cited the *ability to think independently and critically* and to *write well*. Other skills noted included *learning to manage a complex system, gaining self-esteem and confidence, and having a degree that stands out as unique*. Wrote one BIS grad, “The sense of ownership I acquired as a result of the BIS program helped me to not fear thinking ‘outside the box’ and to pursue what I wanted. . . . The BIS program reinforces confidence and self-esteem.”

Advising

With the exception of “referral to other U resources” and “career exploration,” respondents seem to feel that the advising they received from BIS/IDIM staff was helpful.

Grads who gave high ratings to advising related to “defining academic goals,” “feeling somebody was concerned for me as an individual,” “BIS/IDIM program planning,” “meeting CLA requirements,” and department-area advising tended to be those who also rated the overall value of the program highly.

Advising-related questions	1 extremely helpful	2	3	4	5 not helpful
How helpful did you find the following aspects of advising from BIS/IDIM staff? Defining academic goals BIS/IDIM program planning Meeting CLA requirements Referral to other U resources Career exploration Feeling somebody was concerned for me as an individual					
How helpful did you find the advising you received from department (concentration-area) advisers who worked with you?					

IDIM grads gave more positive ratings than did BIS grads for advising related to “referral to other U resources,” “career exploration,” and “feeling somebody was concerned for me as an individual,” as well as for concentration-area advising.

Sense of community

One of the potential drawbacks of an individually designed degree program is that there is no ready-made community for students who share academic interests. The survey therefore included three questions addressing sense of community while at the University of Minnesota.

The most commonly reported resources for feeling a sense of community were non-academic University-sponsored activities, sororities and fraternities, academic organizations or departments, and dorm life.

Questions related to feeling a sense of community	1 to a great degree	2	3	4	5 to a small degree
To what degree would you say you felt part of some University community while a BIS or IDIM student?					
At that time, how important to you was having a sense of community within the University?					
If you did feel part of a community, what formal or informal groups made that possible?					
Top responses:					
• Non-academic University-sponsored activities (athletics, band, etc.)	27%		21%		38%
• Sororities and fraternities	13%		17%		6%
• Academic departments or organizations (such as study clubs)	12%		11%		14%
• Dorm life	11%		10%		11%

Prospective students advised to explore options, seek resources

Good candidates for the BIS and IDIM programs, according to respondents, are students who are self directed and willing to work hard and who have a clear sense of their own goals.

When asked what they felt current students should consider before deciding to pursue a BIS or IDIM program, respondents most commonly mentioned the following:

- Define your interests and goals, including career goals.
- Be prepared to work hard and independently, and to encounter some red tape throughout the process.
- Explore other options (majors, degree programs, etc.) before committing to BIS or IDIM.
- Be aware of how your degree will be perceived in your chosen career field and how applicable your degree will be to a particular career.

Willingness to provide career guidance to current students

The survey's final question asked respondents whether they would be willing to provide informational interviews to current or recently graduated BIS/IDIM students. Ninety-one — nearly half — said they would. We have now created an alumni database, listing these graduates and describing their work experience, to use as a resource for students seeking information on particular career fields.

A full report is also available. For information, please contact the Individualized Degree Programs Office at 612-624-8006.