

Covert Customized Curriculums: Students rarely design own FU program of study

How can you talk to students about a subject they have never even heard of before?

That's what Dr. Vincent Rosivach, who helped create the Fairfield program, reasons when he wonders why so few College of Arts and Sciences students take the little known academic path of Individually Designed Majors (IDM).

## **A Leg Up**

It sounds like a great opportunity, creating an individually designed major that lets you pull together your own program of study among the many majors, minors and programs in the College of Arts and Sciences.

There is evidence that IDM students experience an advantage academically and professionally, according to a recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education. The Wasserman Center for Career Development at New York University noted their IDM students "generally fare better in the job market than classmates with traditional majors."

The Chronicle also indicated IDM students are more likely to win fellowships and graduate school admittance. At Duke University, five of the 13 Rhodes scholars in the last 15 years have been IDM students, although their numbers only comprise 5 percent of the student body.

Katie Molteni, a self-designed Chinese Studies major and a former advisee of Dr. Danke Li, is now working for Yale-China Association and is the Director for its Student/scholarship programs. Another of her students, Matthew Ryder, received a Fulbright Scholarship to China after his graduation from Fairfield and now is in a PhD program back in the US.

Li's current advisee, Carolyn Greene will be graduating this year with a self-designed Chinese studies major. "She has been accepted into a Master's program at UPenn," said Li.

Dr. Joan Weiss, Assistant Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and director of the IDM program at Fairfield, recalled, "The program was very impressed with what [Greene] was able to experience in the area...in preparation."

Several institutions report IDM students have consistently graduated with honors at higher rates than other students, according to The Chronicle.

## **Under the Radar**

Yet out of Fairfield University's 1,479 declared majors in the College of Arts and Sciences, only 3 students have declared IDMs for the class of 2012.

“I wish more people knew about it, because there may be some people who would like this sort of thing,” said Rosivach, who is also a professor of classical studies at the university.

“Nobody’s out there banging the drums,” he said. “Generally in our higher education – in high school as well – we think inside the disciplines.” Rosivach thinks that it is that institutionalized view of education as well as a lack of awareness that contributes to the relative secrecy of the program.

Statistically, most students come to Fairfield with a major already in mind according to Rosivach. Therefore, the IDM programs are rarely sought out. “The spectrum of majors seems to be filled,” he said, “which works for the most students who are used to planning and working disciplinarily.”

### **At Fairfield University**

Since it’s initiation in 2002, 36 students have graduated with IDMs.

The programs have varied from Environmental studies to Anthropology in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The most popular programs have been focused in Classical studies, Asian studies, and Latin America and Caribbean studies. But an IDM program can work in fields like journalism or writing as well.

If a journalism student was interested in political reporting, they could create a curriculum plan to take four news-writing courses in the English department, two mass media courses in Communication, a Media and Politics course in Politics and two television production courses in New Media. In such a fashion, they would study across discipline lines.

But a plan is only part of the program. The student would also have to enlist the help of at least two faculty advisers that represent most of the affected program.

“The deans that are in charge of this are very good at trying to make sure that [the programs are] rigorous,” said Dr. David Downie, the director of the environment program at Fairfield. He’s helped advising students from the past three years and has seen what works.

“My worry with individual majors is that they can be a mile wide and an inch deep,” he said. Without a particular strength or set of skills developed with an IDM program “they don’t necessarily prepare people to do anything specific.”

“That’s why the university has a high bar for their design.”

### **A Brief History**

IDMs came to Fairfield in 2001, relatively late in the IDM game, but Rosivach believes that developing the program almost 40 years after it's introduction has benefits.

For example: one of Fairfield's IDM program mandates that a student must be declared by the end of their sophomore year. Rosivach explained the rule as a response to an incident at another Connecticut university. The stipulation keeps someone in their junior year from combining the scattering of courses they've collected. "It should be a planned endeavor," said Weiss.

But besides a safeguard, Weiss thinks the deadline is a benefit for students. "They've also taken a few courses here and are able to see their passion and the direction they want to take their education," she said. "And they've also had some time on campus to get to know the various departments' professors to see who might be good advisors for their academic curriculum."

Rosivach accredits former Assistant Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Dr. Beverly Kahn as an important contributor to the safeguards built into Fairfield's IDM design. As a professional administrator, her research and exploration of previous IDM programs in other universities allowed for "The design of the program to take into account [possible pitfalls]," he explained.

The program started with a conversation between Kahn and Rosivach. "I tried to reconstruct the issues," he said. Before IDMs, the interdisciplinary studies had no majors for interested students.

### **Not for Most**

There is little publicity for the program, other than a brief mention in the university catalog. Interviews with students showed that although many at Fairfield have heard of the program, most decide not to use it.

"I thought about doing it," said Bruni Moraza '13, "but never really decided to."

Other students, though they never heard of it before, feel their academic interests are already met like Emily Sawyer '14, "I don't think I'd need to consider doing it since Fairfield has my major and minor."

But with the chance that there might be some students interested, Li sees its importance. "If we do not have the program," she said, "students...will miss the opportunity to major in [their interest] because we do not have those majors."

### **The Beginning and Saturation**

Despite the small number of students in the program, the Individually Designed Major exist in more than 100 colleges and universities in the United States since the programs began to appear in the 60's, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education.

In the University of Pennsylvania, students can get dual degrees in the four schools. "Students can mix and match degrees between two of any of the schools," explains Maggie Earcolani '13, a sophomore at the university. "So like, they can get a degree from Wharton for finance, and also be a nurse."

In other universities, like Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Babson College, students can pick areas to concentrate their studies. "We all graduate with a major in business administration but have the option to pick areas to concentrate in," said Parvati Vaish '13 who attends Babson.

"At RPI," said T.J. Lipscomb, a sophomore at the university, "I also know a few people who are working to start up their own 'concentrations' within their major."

Still other institutions, such as Burlington College, only allow self-constructed majors.

### **Reasons Behind their Reform**

With the little publicity, it takes a specific series of events to lead a student to an IDM application.

"I was really interested in the subject matter and I couldn't find interest with any other established majors," Dave Grazynski '04, who graduated from Fairfield with a major in Visual and Auditory Culture, told the Mirror. "I thought that my time at Fairfield would be best spent doing something that I designed myself."

"I suggest to anyone that is interested in designing their own major definitely do it," Lindsay MacDonald '04, an environmental studies major, told the Mirror.

That motivation that leads students to the program also carries them through rough spots in the process.

"The advice I can give is to stick with it," said Grazynski who said he "had to work through a lot of red tape" while working on his major. "Don't let all the headaches that come with it hinder your progress."

For MacDonald, her most difficult times were her self-reflections. "I really needed to look into the importance of my major and why I was basing my college education on this area of study," she told the Mirror in 2002. "Most people have some idea of how their major will help them in the future but by designing my own, I really had to consider my future goals."

### **Planned Enjoyment**

Weiss believes Fairfield's required evaluations for the IDM portfolio offer students a rewarding opportunity to reflect on their academic progress.

"The pre-designed majors don't have the wonderful opportunity of reflecting and consciously deciding what courses to take to satisfy their hunger for knowledge."