

Making Your Degree Your Business: Using Individualized Degree Programs As a Curriculum Tool

Edgar A Maldonado, The Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado, USA
Vicky Seehusen, The Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado, USA

ABSTRACT

In this article, we propose a new model for the development of university curriculum, particularly curriculum in business programs. Our framework introduces the idea of using Individualized Degree Programs as a liaison between arts and sciences, professional studies and business departments, to design new degrees, minors, or programs that satisfy today's professional demands. This theoretical work also includes a research agenda for future work.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, Business Programs, Business Degrees, Individualized Degree Programs, Student Course Choices

INTRODUCTION

The way business colleges have created curriculum hasn't changed for a long time. Programs are created and modified with the collaboration of several stakeholders. Students provide their input into the process only when becoming alumni and elect to serve on departmental advisory boards.

Given the rigidity of the curriculum process, needs defined by employers and students take too long to be included in designing or modifying University programs. There is a current model for how the curriculum is created, and we are adding elements to this process to speed it up: in this paper, we propose a collaborative way to create new programs and minors using the knowledge base of Individualized Degree Programs (IDP) as the main tool. Basically, IDPs are uniquely qualified to provide input into new majors, minors, and other programs by looking at the course choice trends of IDP students.

Background

The number of students declaring business majors has increased in recent years. When taking into account all the academic fields that are considered as business majors (finance, accounting, marketing, management, and information systems), one out every five bachelor's degrees awarded each year is a business degree (Selingo, 2017). Additionally, business courses have been paired with other disciplines such as healthcare and construction management to create new majors and minors. Cross-departmental collaborations have sprung at many universities in response to a recognition that a more holistic and realistic business education is needed, coupled with state governments identifying the need for diversification of their economies and sharing this information with local higher education institutions (Haughton, 2013).

In another curricular innovation, we see many business schools that have taken an active role in using applied learning concepts to complement formal coursework. Applied learning attempts to integrate classroom learning and what happens in real businesses. It is described as: "learning by doing". University applied learning programs across the country attempt to describe the unique opportunities for students who get involved with their programs. Some of these opportunities include entrepreneurship and social innovation, leadership, research, internships and service learning. (UC San Diego, 2017) The variety of opportunities are designed to appeal to the entire student population, regardless of major.

The potential drawback to applied learning, particularly for a student who is a non-business major is that he/she can only take a small number of applied learning credits. This applied learning experience may not be enough exposure to satisfy the student who is attempting to merge a degree in Health Education with Business Entrepreneurship, for example. This student who has declared an Arts and Science major must then declare a business entrepreneurship minor – if one exists at his/her institution.

Another problem with current programs and is that even when college business programs acknowledge the role of Arts and Sciences courses in providing foundational knowledge for their business majors (i.e. the need for Math in a Finance Degree) the ultimate decision of what is taught in the business program remains the prerogative of the

business disciplines (Topi, 2013). So cross-departmental collaboration that may lead to changes in majors, minors and other programs may actually be hindered by the current business disciplines.

Thus, we looked at how cross-departmental collaboration might occur in a more formalized way that would not lend itself to being hindered by any one discipline. At the university we studied, the Health Information Systems degree was a result of cross-departmental and cross-college collaboration. As we looked into how this collaboration occurred, we found that the Individualized Degree Program (IDP) was instrumental in identifying course enrollment trends: it was IDP staff who reported their informal observations of student course enrollment trends to the healthcare and business management departments. These departments then partnered to create a new degree in Healthcare Management.

As universities grapple with the changing needs of the community and business environment, the need for departments to partner with other departments may be greater and curricular change may need to occur more rapidly.

THE IDP

Although this study is a theoretical one, to inform our research we looked at a specific IDP. We looked at the IDP of a mid-size, open-entry university serving a population of approximately 21000 students in an urban setting in the Rocky Mountain area. The institution mostly serves what is considered a nontraditional student population since average student age is approximately 25 years old. The university has three Colleges (Business; Letters, Arts, and Sciences; and Professional Studies) and a School of Education. The Colleges and the School offer 86 bachelor's degrees and five master's degrees. Students who do not want to participate in the current majors or minors offered by the university can apply to create an Individualized Degree through the Center for Individualized Learning.

The Individualized Degree Program (IDP) allows students to propose a major or a minor that satisfies her/his interests. A typical IDP major entails a minimum of 40 credit hours (with this option, the student is required to have a minor) and includes 21 hours of upper-division credit. There is an IDP extended version that requires a minimum of 60 credit hours, including 27 hours of upper-division credit.

After a student has met an IDP advisor and decided to follow an individualized program, the student must write a proposal explaining the rationale of his/her course choices and degree plan. Among the questions the student is expected to answer are:

- Concisely define and describe your field of study.
- What are your goals for your degree program?
- Why is the IDP the best avenue to help you achieve your goals?
- Introduce yourself, reflecting on your experience and educational history particularly as it relates to your chosen field of study.

University requirements for IDP (General Studies, Multicultural Studies, and a number of residency credits) are the same that for any other bachelor's degree. Additionally, an IDP cannot have more than 30 credit hours from the College of Business, and students are expected to keep a GPA of at least 2.5 before their proposals receives final approval. Finally, a minimum grade of "C" is required in each course included in the IDP.

Housed in the Center for Individualized Learning, the IDP is a valuable and essential program for students that do not find current majors appealing. On its website, the center states: "The Center for Individualized Learning (CIL) houses several different programs geared toward expanding on the traditional university academic experience." Additionally, in its program mission statement, the IDP states "The IDP also serves as an incubator for new academic programs at the University, allowing the University to respond quickly to changing needs in the community and workplace." (MSU Denver, 2018) This statement is broad enough to allow the IDP to perform or take on multiple roles within the institution. If we break the statement down and describe keywords such as "incubator" more accurately, we may provide clarity and a theoretical model to position the CIL to be a more effective liaison between departments to create degrees and programs heretofore unconsidered by the departments.

While there are many colleges and universities now offering IDPs, an examination of literature yielded no studies of IDPs. Perhaps local institutions offering IDPs have performed internal studies, however, the efficacy or impact of IDPs on higher education institutions in general has not been evaluated.

THE TRADITIONAL MODEL OF CURRICULUM CRAFTING

When looking at the process by which curriculum is changed, business colleges follow the same procedure that other colleges or schools follow. The process was described by Lattuca & Stark (2011). Figure 1 illustrates the

authors' model of factors influencing the development of curriculum in colleges and universities.

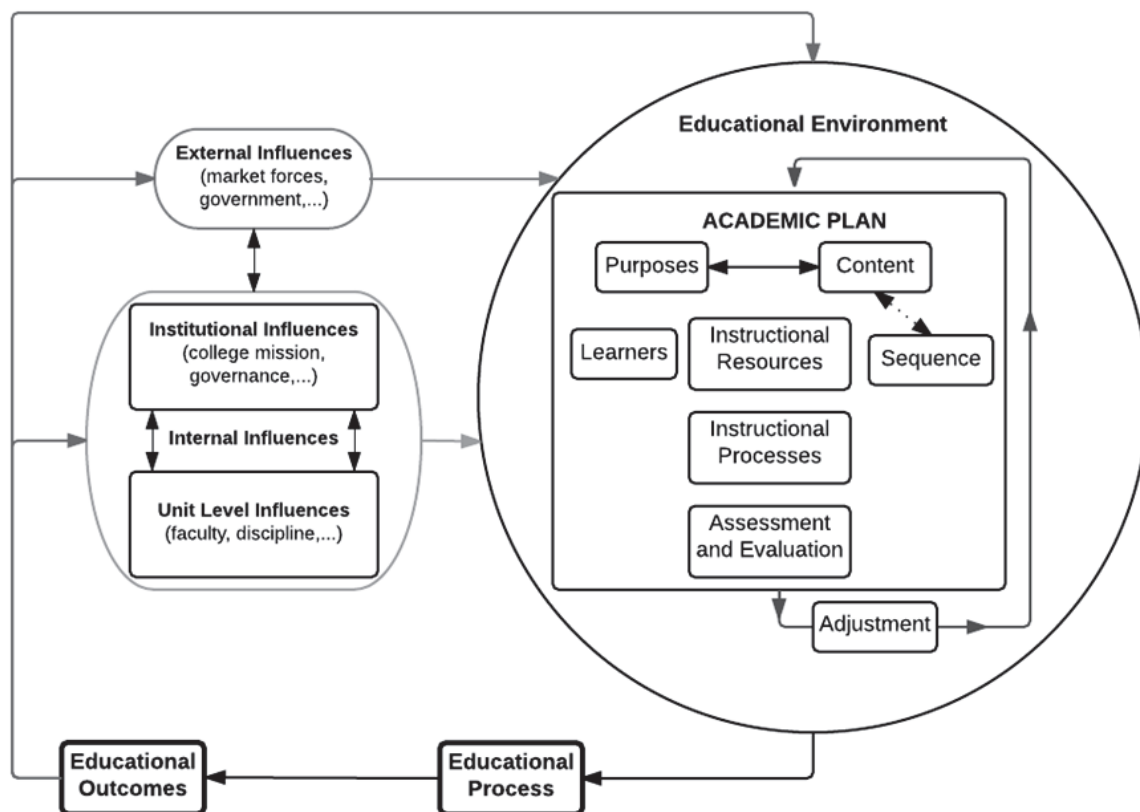
Lattuca & Stark identified an Educational Environment that includes self-adjustment of the Academic Plan.

The Academic Plan includes three factors that interact: Purposes, Content, and Sequence. Three other elements influence the Educational Environment: Instructional Resources, Instructional Processes, and Assessment and Evaluation. Finally, Learners are also considered as part of the Educational Environment. Nevertheless, Learners are static and do not interact with Purposes, Content, or Sequence of the Academic Plan.

The Educational Outcomes of the program (i.e. quality of their graduates) impact the Educational Environment of the specific program and also shape the External and Internal Influences. At the same time, those External Influences such as market forces or economic changes, as well as Internal Influences such as college procedures, affect the Educational Environment. The Adjustment of the Academic Plan takes place under the Educational Environment's conditions.

The Lattuca and Stark model has two feedback loops. One of the loops feeds from the Educational Environment (i.e. the same department activities), and the other loop comes from the Educational Outcomes. The input from students that directly effects curricular programs seems to take place only once the students are no longer students (they have graduated). They influence the program by means of their own jobs/companies or more directly by being part of the advisory boards. The model presented by Lattuca & Stark only takes into account those traditional programs that exist in the University and that only get changed after long administrative procedures.

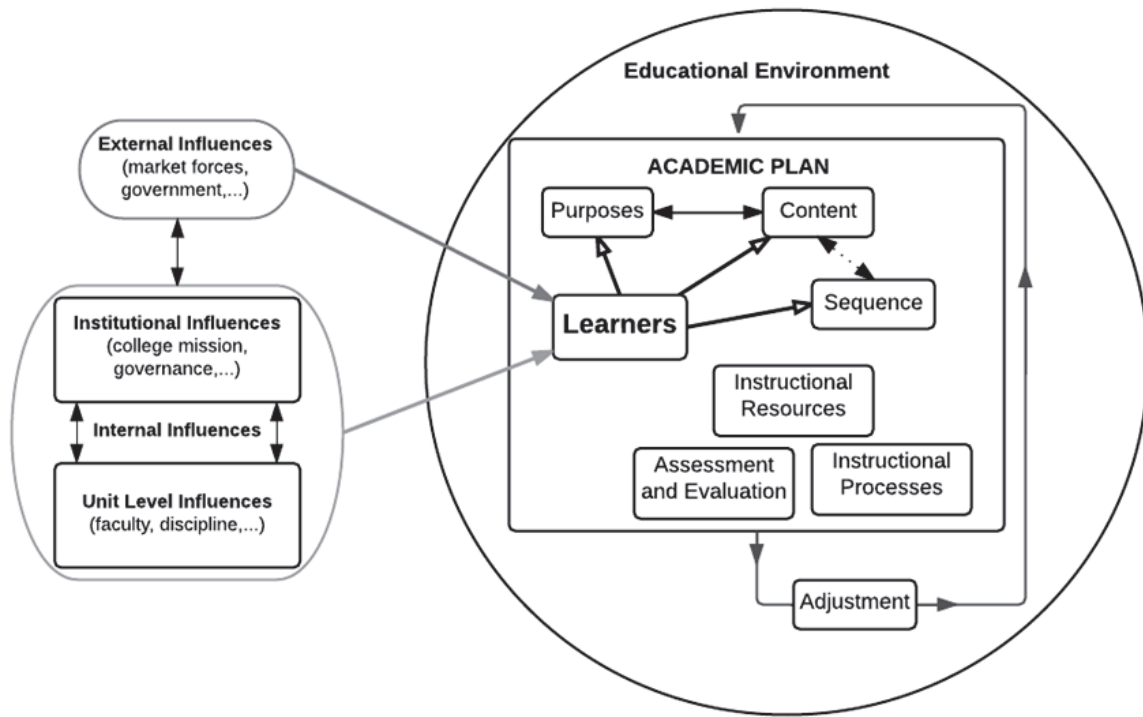
Figure 1. Academic Plans in Sociocultural Context (adapted from Lattuca & Stark, 2011 p.5).



When looking at the IDP, it seems clear that the Lattuca & Stark model does not apply directly to this form of degree. In an IDP, the student becomes an active entity, that changes in real time, the “Purposes, Content, and

Sequence” of his/her program. In Figure 2 we have adapted the Lattuca & Stark model to focus on the immediacy of the IDP curricular process, when using the IDP learner as reference.

Figure 2. Academic Plans in Sociocultural Context for an IDP learner.



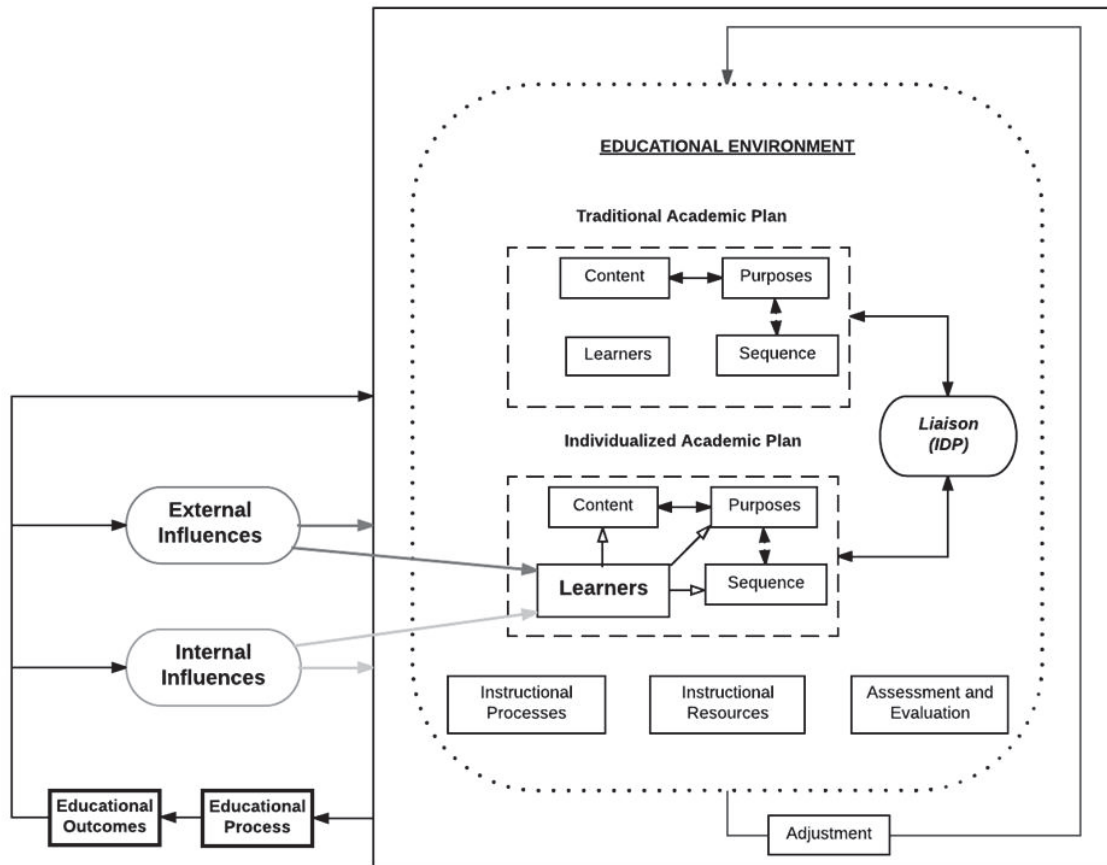
In this model, the External and Internal Influences now impact the Learner, who becomes an active component of the Academic Plan. The concept of the learner being an active component in Academic Planning is not new. For years, K-12 schools have used Individualized Education Programs for students with special needs (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). However, this is a small subset of a much larger K-12 population that, like college and university students, has little control over degree components or the design of their majors. At university, taking electives or declaring minors are generally the only way students have of expressing their own personal interests in areas of learning beyond their majors.

We contend that current students should be an active part of the curriculum crafting process; they can be used as source of knowledge to inform decisions related to new university programs.

PROPOSED MODEL

Trends in the IDP should not be ignored. Students creating their own degrees are generally older and have often been in the business world and thus may have a better understanding of the skills they need to be successful in their chosen career. We propose to use the knowledge from IDP to inform the curriculum process for traditional business majors. Figure 3 is the representation of our model. The Traditional Academic Plan and the Individualized Academic Plan coexist in the Educational Environment. The Traditional Academic Plan receives information from Individualized Academic Plans, by means of the IDP Liaison.

Figure 3. IDP Curricular Liaison Model.



In our new model, the student is an integral part of curriculum design. While the students do not formally suggest curriculum design, his/her actions because of enrollment in the IDP are taken into account. Right now, this liaison model may informally exist within universities. It may exist in small “silos” whereby two or more departments have visualized trends and responded with formalized approaches in the form of new courses or partner programs. We suggest “institutionalizing” or formally recognizing the link between business departments and the preferences of students in an IDP. With a formal relationship defined between the IDP and the business disciplines, it is possible that curricular or degree changes can occur more quickly and thus be more responsive to the needs of business and industry.

Regardless of where the liaison of such a plan resides – in the college of business or in the IDP - some of the responsibilities of the liaison would be:

- Inform current course enrollment trends in IDP majors
- Identify patterns of collaboration between academic departments and business college
- Gather information from companies and the overall job market related to specific needs
- Prepare reports for disciplines illustrating how their courses contribute to the needs of business and industry

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

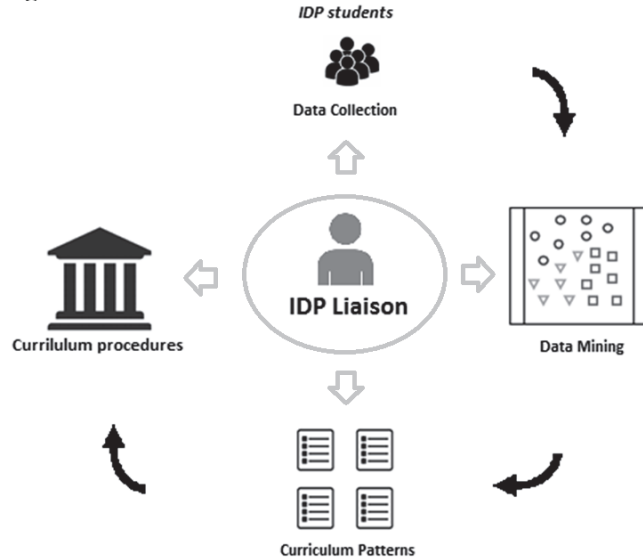
To create a research agenda, we need to categorize the activities carried out by the IDP liaison and use each category as a potential research venue. Basically, there are four main activities that the IDP liaison must carry out:

1. Collection of Data from the IDP
2. Data mining of IDP data

3. Recognition of curriculum patterns
4. Curriculum procedures.

The IDP liaison will collect relevant data from the IDP students. Then, the liaison will use data mining techniques (such clustering, decision trees, etc.) to find curricular patterns. Finally, with that information, the liaison will be able to participate in the curriculum creation process. The four activities are represented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. IDP Curricular Liaison Model activities



Each of the main activities mentioned above has its own set of questions that can be used as part of a research agenda. Table 1 provides information on sample research questions that can be pursued for each of the activities.

We have started using IDP data to provide valuable information that might be used in the development of new curriculum and programs. Our first research project analyzed historical data from an IDP using K-means (a data mining algorithm). We identified possible clusters of business courses that could be considered new majors/minors. The paper has been submitted for publication and is currently under review.

CONCLUSION

Many stakeholders should be considered when creating curriculum. These stakeholders include students, academics, industry, and society. However, the stakeholders that are not included are generally actively enrolled students. In fact, their course choices and preferences are not taken into consideration until after they graduate. Gathering information about student choice trends by evaluating the course choices of students creating their own IDP degrees could be a way to speed up the curricular development and redevelopment of programs – particularly those programs that have a strong business education component.

How we gather this information about student course choices is often not a formalized process within the institution. The importance of the IDP as a source of valuable information cannot be underestimated. If a formal relationship existed between the IDP and various disciplines, the disciplines would then be aware of student enrollment trends more quickly and be able to make decisions about how to, or if they should incorporate these trends into the curricular design. This theoretical work sets out a research agenda to study how Individualized Degree programs can contribute to the evolving educational process of converting students into business professionals.

Table 1. IDP Curricular Liaison Model tasks and research questions

Activity	Sample Research Questions
Collection of Data from IDP students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the motivations for a student to pursue an IDP degree? • How can IDP students motivations be translated into curriculum needs? • What data currently exist that is untapped that would be useful to a liaison process? •
Data Mining Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of analytics would be required to summarize the data so that disciplines could make good decisions about new programs? • What can indicate critical mass to be recognized as a trend?
Recognition of Curriculum Patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of new curriculum are needed? • How do IDP curriculum patterns map to the traditional curriculum and major/minor composition?
Liaison Procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do processes for creating a liaison model need to be formalized by the institution? • How would information about a liaison process be distributed? • What would be required for departments to accept and actively work within a liaison process? • How would a liaison process affect current curriculum and program development within an institution? • What would the challenges be for institutions who choose to formalize the relationship between the IDP and various disciplines to create new or “incubator” programs? • Who or what department would provide data that could be used to determine the efficacy of creating new programs?

REFERENCES

- MSU Denver. (2018, January 31). *The Center for Individualized Learning*. Retrieved from: <https://msudenver.edu/cil/individualizeddegreeprograms/>.
- Haughton, D. (2013). Business Analytics at the Confluence of Business Education and Arts & Sciences. In *Shaping the Future of Business Education: Relevance, Rigor, and Life Preparation* (pp. 94-106). New York, NY: St. Martins Press.
- Lattuca, L. R., & Stark, J. S. (2011). *Shaping the college curriculum: Academic plans in context*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Selinger, J. J. (2017, January 28). Business is the most popular college major, but that doesn't mean it's a good choice. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/01/28/business-is-the-most-popular-college-major-but-that-doesnt-mean-its-a-good-choice/?utm_term=.17513bb2de7f.
- Friend, M., & Bursuck, W. D. (2002). *Including students with special needs: A practical guide for classroom teachers*. Allyn & Bacon, A Pearson Education Company, 75 Arlington Street, Boston, MA 02116.
- Topi, H. (2013). Transforming Business Education Through Disciplinary Integration: The Case for Information Systems. In *Shaping the Future of Business Education: Relevance, Rigor, and Life Preparation* (pp. 107-119). New York: St Martins Press.
- UC San Diego, 2017. *What is Applied Learning?* Retrieved from https://real.ucsd.edu/_unused%20pages/what-is-applied-learning.html