**BDIC and Commonwealth College**

BDIC has a new academic home. In 2007, the university announced that BDIC would be housed in Commonwealth College.

Priscilla M. Clarkson, the dean of Commonwealth College, stated, “I plan to expand this program by highlighting its uniqueness, innovation, rigor, and interdisciplinary studies as well as making this a major of choice for creative students who want to tailor their own education.” (UMass Amherst Foundations, vol. 5, Fall 2007)

Commonwealth College is the honors college at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Established in 1999, it offers academically talented students a community that promotes engagement with peers, leading scholars, and society.

Since its founding in 1970, BDIC has been committed to serving both honors and non-honors students. BDIC Director Daniel Gordon says, “The idea is not to restrict BDIC to honors students but to include BDIC in the culture of excellence promoted by Commonwealth College, and to offer Commonwealth College students the creative vibe of BDIC.”

Previously, BDIC was a free-standing program because its range of student concentrations was too wide to fit within the disciplinary range of any of the academic colleges.

BDIC is now being featured in Commonwealth College brochures as a potential major for honors students with multiple academic interests. Students who major in BDIC while fulfilling the Commonwealth College capstone and other requirements will graduate with the added distinction of “interdisciplinary honors.”

Dean Clarkson is a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Kinesiology. She has served as president of the American College of Sports Medicine and received the Award for Outstanding Accomplishments in Research or Creative Activity, University of Massachusetts Amherst, in 2005. Also interested in ballet, Clarkson has co-written books on dance medicine.

**Taking the Road Less Traveled**

**A Message From Linda Roney, BDIC Coordinator**

I can hardly believe that I am going into my 12th year as BDIC coordinator! Every moment of my time in BDIC has been rewarding. Most fulfilling of all is having the privilege of helping students develop their concentration from an inspiration to a solid academic program and then to a unique career. It is like watching the evolution from caterpillar to cocoon to the final, free-flying butterfly.

It seems as if every year students are thinking of more inventive areas of concentration. Last year, for example, a student created a major in The Marriage of Money and Soul. The student plans to become a financial consultant, but in a manner that includes ethical and spiritual advising.

We are also observing a rise in medically oriented concentrations from students with humanitarian dreams of helping out in underprivileged countries. Many of them do so while still in BDIC through internships or volunteer opportunities. One such student volunteered in Uganda this past summer.

By daring to be different and taking the road less traveled, BDIC students have exposed themselves to risks but have also put themselves on the cutting edge of education and of society.

If solutions to complex societal problems have to be found, BDIC students will help find them. Through BDIC, students are being trained to think and act as leaders and to integrate rather than divide information. They are being prepared for an ever-changing world that requires versatile skills and original thinking. BDIC students really are our future—the future of our university and the future of our world.

Linda Roney was the coordinator of advising in the former College of Arts and Sciences before joining BDIC as the Coordinator in 1997. She received the university’s Outstanding Academic Advisor Award in 2005.
What happens when students who designed their own major in college go out into the world? It’s no surprise that many BDIC alumni have started new companies or are serving as leaders of innovative organizations. Below is a small sample of BDIC alumni leaders.

Loring Barnes, (1983, Public Relations Management) is managing principal of Clarity, an award winning national marketing and public relations consultancy that has been distinguished for excellence by the White House and by respected industry associations since its founding in 2001. Loring advises C-Level executives from early-stage and mature product and services companies and cause-driven organizations on how to achieve and build brand trust through deliberate communications. Loring has spoken to business, women’s, and university audiences about personal branding topics and has been an undergrad and MBD mentor for Babson College. She plays in UMass golf tournaments and is a member of the USTA New England 6.0 Mixed Doubles champion tennis team. She also serves on the board of Hospitality Homes, which provides locally hosted housing for families of hospital patients, and volunteers for the North East All Retriever Rescue.

Stephen Greeley (1977, Music and Theater) served as director of communications at the Boston University School for the Arts and director of corporate and foundation relations at Bentley College. He was also director of development at Brigham and Women’s Hospital before co-founding DCA, where he serves as president. DCA is a consulting firm dedicated to helping clients build support for achieving large-scale social progress. Steve’s projects have included the development of major initiatives to advance early childhood education and literacy in Charlotte, Miami, and Louisville; the design and funding of the nation’s largest non-profit dedicated to protecting youth from tobacco addiction; and the design of resource development strategies for the Hilton-Perkins International Program, the Global Fund for Children’s Vaccines, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, and the Harvard Medical School and its hospital affiliates.

Kevin B. Harris (1993, Management Information Systems) worked after graduation as a network administrator for the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and as senior network administrator at Johnson Controls. In 1998, he co-founded AmeriVault, which provides data protection services for businesses. The company was recently acquired by PHNS. Kevin is now contemplating a new venture in the field of home automation.

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Rebecca Hamilton (2009, Ethnobotany and Natural Product Development) pursued a BDIC major to prepare herself to work as the head of product development and research at her family’s New Hampshire-based company, Badger. Badger is an environmentally aware company that produces natural personal care and healing products.

While Rebecca was a BDIC student, she won an award for Outstanding Community Service and Engagement, the Saul Klamann Humanitarian Award. In June, Rebecca also won the Julia F. Morton Award for best poster presentation at the Society for Economic Botany Conference in Charleston, S.C.

Robin Butler DiGiammarino (1976, Psychology and Exercise Science) went on to earn a graduate degree in Occupational Therapy from Boston University. Her career in allied health included direct patient care as well as serving as assistant chief in the Occupational Therapy department at George Washington University Medical Center.

Linking individual interests continues to shape Robin’s career path. After five years of service as an elected school board member and chairperson, Robin combined her health care background with her interest in collaboration and training as a mediator. In 2006, Robin founded Lodestar Mediation, a company providing workplace mediation and training for organizations in the metropolitan Boston area.
Alex Cook (2009, Entrepreneurship and Information Technology) started a company called Rentabilities with his brother Andy while still in college. Rentabilities is a service that provides party rental stores with the ability to take orders online. The Cook brothers (Andy, left, and Alex) are now working on rolling out a complete rental management software package.

Alex has two other side passions. One is ReserveTheEarth.org, a project that helps people locate and sign up for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms online. This is a joint venture with current BDIC student Adam O’Neill. The other is MyTownTutors.com, “which I started with two of my high school teachers last year.” It helps students and parents find qualified teachers who also offer tutoring.

Sean Manseau (1993, Psychology of Religion) is the founder of Pioneer Valley CrossFit. PVCF is an affiliate of CrossFit.com, an Internet-based community dedicated to achieving elite levels of fitness by training constantly varied movements at high intensity. “Basically,” Sean says, “everyone should be able to run, jump, or pick something heavy up off the ground. We teach them how.” Sean compares Crossfit to BDIC, saying that each is designed to avoid over-specialization.

Located in Florence, Mass., PVCF is a community dedicated to the physical and personal advancement of its members. The aim is for everyone to grow not only in physical capacity but in courage and integrity. Sean says, “Our small group format is also an antidote to some of the alienation and loneliness that are part of our modern life. No one is left to sink or swim on their own.”

Jodi Sleeper-Triplett, (1980, Human Services/Mental Health) spent her senior year as a paralegal intern at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., a truly eye-opening experience! Jodi is president of JST Coaching, LLC, a premiere coach training and coaching company. To meet the growing demands for qualified youth coaches, JST Coaching offers the first coach training program focused on the intricacies of coaching youth with ADHD. She is passionate about supporting the needs of youth, volunteering with many local and national organizations focused on coaching and ADHD.

Jodi is also the director of training for the Edge Foundation, a non-profit organization providing coaching for adolescents and young adults with ADHD; and co-founder of the Institute for the Advancement of ADHD Coaching.

First National Conference for BDIC-Type Programs

On March 5 and 6, 2009, the first national conference for leaders in programs like BDIC took place at Indiana University, Bloomington. The conference was titled “Individualized Major Programs: Best Practices and Besetting Challenges.”

Organizers of the conference were BDIC Director Daniel Gordon and the directors of similar programs at Indiana University and the University of Connecticut. About twenty-five representatives attended from fourteen universities, including New York University, University of Iowa, University of Alabama, University of Michigan, and Drexel University.

Most universities do not have individualized major programs, but an inventory, still in process, indicates there may be as many as forty programs like BDIC in the country.

The conference participants shared their experiences on topics such as “Promoting Interdisciplinary Learning” and “Relations with Other Departments and Academic Units.”

The participants agreed to hold the conference again in 2010. The website for the conference and for the emerging national association of individualized major programs (IMP) is being developed by BDIC student Elliot Gerber (Graphic Communication).

The IMP website and complete conference report will soon be available through a link on the BDIC website.
I’m happy to report that one of the most ambitious goals I mentioned in our last newsletter—to create new BDIC courses—is now a reality. Details are provided elsewhere in this newsletter. I hope the entire newsletter conveys the fact that after 38 years of existence, BDIC is alive and well.

Daniel Gordon has been a faculty member in the History Department at UMass Amherst since 1995 and director of BDIC since 2008. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago and an M.S.L. from Yale Law School, and is coeditor of the journal Historical Reflections.

The Four Pillars of BDIC

Daniel Gordon, BDIC Director

BDIC is an unusual academic program. An important part of my job is explaining its merits to new students, parents, and faculty who are not yet familiar with the BDIC concept.

BDIC rests on four pillars.

Individualized learning. Students design their own concentrations in light of their academic interests and career dreams. Given this opportunity, students tend to become impassioned about their studies. Not only does BDIC attract some top students, but there are also many cases of mediocre students dramatically improving their academic performance after joining the program.

Interdisciplinary learning. The student must combine classes from three different departments, with all classes at the 300 level or higher. The concentration must be interdisciplinary; it must have a unifying theme. The idea is to make novel connections among subject matters that are normally kept within specialized boundaries.

Intensive advising. Each BDIC student has access to a faculty supervisor (there are six professors who hold office hours in BDIC); a faculty sponsor (selected by the student from any department); a professional adviser (Linda Roney); and the student peer advisers (six students chosen for leadership traits and academic excellence).

Leadership. We encourage BDIC students to define themselves as founders, directors, creators—not just future members of the “workforce.” BDIC alumni include high-tech executives, award-winning novelists and film-makers, and deans and provosts at major universities.

The prominence of BDIC alumni right here on our own campus has not always been noted but includes among others: the head coach of men's basketball, the director of development research, the director of the honors seminar series in Commonwealth College, and the associate director of the Everywoman's Center.

In terms of planning, BDIC aims to become more widely known and to grow in its integral relationship to strategic elements of UMass Amherst and its future. Chancellor Robert C. Holub’s 2009 Report, “Framework for Excellence,” emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary education and research. BDIC has the potential to become a symbol of the university’s commitment to excellence in this area.

To Stretch Students’ Imaginations: The BDIC Proposal Writing Class

BDIC began offering a proposal writing class 10 years ago to give students starting the major more guidance in plotting the course of their studies. Students not only formalize their ideas for an individualized program of study but also examine an assortment of interdisciplinary readings.

Some of the readings covered in the spring 2009 proposal class were: a chapter from Jonah Lehrer’s recent best-seller, Proust was a Neuroscientist, an article on leadership by Dr. Robert Terry, director of the Reflective Leadership Program at the University of Minnesota, an article titled “The World Needs More Rebels Like Einstein,” by Walter Isaacson—and several other pieces intended to stretch students’ imaginations and allow them to consider a larger academic arena.

The proposal class also begins to form a BDIC social entity, bringing students together to share common ideas and goals.

Not all proposals are accepted, and students must often modify their proposals to meet the program’s standards for interdisciplinary inquiry.

Applications for the fall 2009 proposal class have shot up, with more than 100 students in the two sections, compared to the usual 80. Two sections will also be offered in the spring.

Some BDIC Award Winners in 2009

In the past academic year, many BDIC students and alumni received prestigious campus awards.

August Siena Cohn-Thomas (The Ancient World) was named a 2008 Davidson Fellow. The Davidson Institute for Talent Development is a national nonprofit organization that supports gifted youth. The 17-year-old 2009 BDIC graduate received $25,000 and was the only New
companies, including: Student participants in the class have launched real workshops and guest lectures in which students learn

The one-credit entrepreneurship class is a series of courses that are offered through the Commonwealth Honors College, but BDIC students have shown so much interest in the classes that BDIC decided to sponsor them.

Many speakers visit the classes to bring their real-world expertise and wisdom to the academic arena. Last year, visitors included Michael Kittredge, founder of Yankee Candle, and Jeff Taylor, founder of Monster.com.

Localocracy, a web-based platform for political discussion where users who have been verified as living in a particular community can post and rank responses to their local issues.

Andanje Foundation, which seeks to provide computers and learning technology to youth in remote regions of developing nations, starting with seven pilot programs in Kenya.

The two-credit leadership class is based on critical readings of such works as Dale Carnegie, How to Win Friends and Influence People and Roger Fisher, Getting To Yes. Students also do practical assignments, including goal-clarification exercises, and create a network of personal contacts in the career field that interests them.

Entrepreneurship and Leadership: New BDIC Classes

Starting this fall, BDIC will be offering two new courses, BDIC 397A Introduction to Entrepreneurship and BDIC 397B Leadership and Networking. For several years, the courses have been offered through the Commonwealth Honors College, but BDIC students have shown so much interest in the classes that BDIC decided to sponsor them.

The one-credit entrepreneurship class is a series of workshops and guest lectures in which students learn how to create new organizations.

Student participants in the class have launched real companies, including:

Some Recent Books by BDIC Alumni


Alumni Donations

BDIC is very grateful for the donations alumni have made during the past academic year. These donations have enabled BDIC to offer enrichment programs that would not be affordable without additional funds.

For example, BDIC sponsored two guest lectures about interdisciplinary issues. In November 2008, BDIC brought best-selling author and Fulbright Scholar Jonah Lehrer to campus to speak about the relationship between neuroscience and the humanities. In May, BDIC sponsored a visit by 1996 BDIC alumnus Peter Manseau, who lectured on the challenges and rewards of cross-religious dialogue.

Alumni donations also made it possible for BDIC to give research and travel awards to many deserving students over the course of the year. Hannah Jacobson-Hardy (Sustainability and Environmental Justice) used the funds to support work on her Honors Capstone in which she interviewed and photographed women farmers in Western Massachusetts.

Caitlin Allen (Radio Journalism and Theater Management) used her BDIC grant to assist with the cost of an unpaid internship over the summer with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in Washington, D.C.

Caitlin, Hannah, and many other students not mentioned here relied on the generous donations of BDIC alumni for support when working on an internship or research project.

Thanks for your support!

Especially during these difficult economic times, we would like to recognize and thank our donors who contributed to the program during fiscal year 2009.

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Thanks for your support!
Please consider giving to BDIC

In today’s economy, your donation is more important than ever. Department budgets are decreasing, while expenses are increasing. Your donation will help to support student research projects and travel opportunities, career advising forums with alumni, senior celebrations, and of course this newsletter. Please consider investing in our students and their future goals.

You can donate online at our website: www.umass.edu/bdic and click on the “give now” puzzle piece link in the right margin. If paying by check, please make check payable to the UMass Amherst Annual Fund with BDIC specified in the memo line of the check and mail to:

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I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost,
“The Road Not Taken”