A Message from the BIS Director

I am excited to begin my first full year as Director of the Bachelor of Individualized Study program. Thank you all for your warm welcome. I began my role here in May just in time to help celebrate the 2008 graduates. Seventy-nine BIS students were eligible to don a green cap and gown. It was an honor to shake your hand at graduation and to celebrate with you at the BIS reception. BIS thanks Dr. Nance Lucas for her outstanding leadership as Interim Director last year.

I also had the pleasure of presenting several student awards. Read on to learn more about these talented students and their award-winning senior projects.

For the 2008-09 academic year we are fortunate to have a talented group of faculty teaching BIS courses. Bernadette Costello is teaching our new in-class BIS 490 as well as a section of BIS 491. Ann Palkovich is teaching BIS 390. Ellen Oh and I are teaching BIS 300. Alan More and Ray Lattanzio are teaching BIS 491. Congratulations to Ray for completing his doctorate in the spring.

This fall BIS is beginning the Academic Program Review (APR) process. This multi-year process is designed to guide academic units in thinking reflectively about the academic programs they support. We will be refining our mission and defining explicit learning outcomes. There will be ample opportunity for student and alumni input during this process. Bernadette Costello, Mark Sistek, and I will serve as the APR team.

I am sorry to report that Jason King will be leaving BIS this fall to pursue his graduate studies full time. Many of you know Jason as the helpful voice at the end of the phone. He has mastered the intricacies of Mason’s bureaucracy and does a great deal to facilitate student progress through our academic program. We will miss Jason’s humor and problem-solving skills, but wish him well as he aims for a summer 2009 graduation date for his Master’s degree from the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR).

Your experiences and voices have already informed my understanding of BIS, but I have more to learn. Please continue to share your ideas, your triumphs and stumblings, so that we can celebrate the successes while working to improve the program.

Curriculum Adjustments

Current BIS 490

This required capstone experience has been scheduled as an individualized section with a faculty mentor listed as the instructor of record. Students and faculty mentors implement the research proposal created in BIS 390 with the help of their BIS 390 instructor and the support of another reader. However, overall quality of the BIS 490 projects has been uneven and many students have struggled to find faculty mentors willing and able to supervise BIS 490. The 490 projects pushed students to conduct empirical research complete with data collection.

Based on faculty, student, and alumni feedback, the program has decided to revisit the BIS 490 requirement.

NEW BIS 490

The changes to BIS 490 are designed to offer more support to students and more consistency to the quality of the projects. The syllabus was created over the summer and is being piloted this fall. This revised course requires a critical analysis paper rather than original research. The course still relies on faculty mentors to guide the research as content area advisors, and faculty mentors will be asked to read and comment on a draft or two. BIS faculty who are teaching BIS 490 will help students meet expectations for the capstone project in terms of interdisciplinarity and overall progress.

We understand that this change to BIS 490 means students now must be present for a course rather than pursuing your research independently. Although this change restricts your flexibility, it will enhance the overall support you receive and the overall quality of the projects. The latter, of course, enhances the quality of the degree. By spring 2009, all students will be expected to enroll in the in-class BIS 490 capstone.

Students still need to register for BIS 491 as a co-requisite with BIS 490.

We are working on several initiatives that will involve BIS alumni. We want to stay in touch. The best way to keep our records current is to update your profile on the Mason Alumni Association web page. Please visit www.gmu.edu/alumni and update your profile. Click on the top, left link to the Alumni Directory and login. Your email address and current employer information are the most important data fields to complete. Thanks.

Please send us your news by e-mail: bis@gmu.edu. We’d love to hear from you!
The commute from my home in northern Frederick County was, more often than not, a harrowing experience. Route 50 in the afternoon is more like a stock car derby than a civilized thoroughfare. Every time a Lexus cut me off, I cursed, feeling the road rage that perpetually lurked beneath my deceptively calm exterior, begin to boil over. I reminded myself why I was braving this organized insanity: I was earning a degree. I was accomplishing a lifelong dream, bettering myself so that I could better the life of my family. And, while the oblivious Lexus driver chatted on their cell phone, weaving in and out of traffic, I checked my speed and my components in attaining future success was the primary reason for my desire to earn my degree. It seemed only fitting they would be mentioned. Even though I was committed to my studies, I wouldn’t have lectures to look forward to any longer. The commute would no longer have a shining spot as its terminus.

Now that I’m a GMU alumnus, I can look back over my time at Mason and, more specifically in the BIS program, with pride. I completed the degree I designed to meet my personal goals, and did so with academic distinction. The commute couldn’t deter me; I suffered through the blatant disrespect for my Kia Rio by the SUVs and luxury sedans on the road, and emerged victorious. I can’t take all the credit for my success, however. The amazing people who maintain the offices of the BIS Department were invaluable in helping me reach my personal goals. From Dr. Verdaguer and her firm but fair leadership, to Mark Sistek and his advising prowess and patient compassion, to Jason and Janet and their dedication to keeping campus life that surrounded me. The commute was an inconvenience to attend university functions and activities. Basketball games and concerts, art exhibitions and live tapings of Hardball weren’t essential components to my achieving my goals. I have a family – a wife and children – who, though sympathetic of my collegiate obligations, nonetheless demanded a generous portion of my time. It was to them that I dedicated the time that otherwise would have been devoted to these diversions.

As a husband and father the balancing act between family and studies had an added dimension that made meeting deadlines and focusing interesting to say the least. Prolonged study sessions were a virtual impossibility and report writing was a process of working through a seemingly endless series of distractions. All of which I wouldn’t trade for the world: my family, after all, was one of the primary reasons for my desire to earn my degree. It seemed only fitting they would be involved in the actual process. Still, the lack of interaction with other students was disheartening. Nonparticipation led to a sense of singularity that was both alienating and, at times, distracting. I felt a sense of disconnectedness from the overall university community. BIS classes were held in the evenings, in secluded sections of Robinson Hall or Science and Technology I. I was a Masonite yet, at the same time, not. I came to campus like everyone else, attended classes like everyone else, bought lunch in the food court, and purchased mocha lattes at Jazzman’s, but I didn’t feel a part of the bustling campus life that surrounded me. The social networking that is an integral component in attaining future success was missing.

Fortunately, the amenable staff of the BIS department was willing to endure my seemingly endless questions about procedures and deadlines, patiently listened to my concerns and provided much-needed reassurance that I was positioned to complete my degree as planned. During my last semester, I discovered I could connect with the university in a positive way by signing on as a writer with Broadside. I was plugged in to the events of Mason and became a participant in these events . . . if only as an objective observer. I was involved, at last. And to whom did I go to share this connectedness I had discovered? To the BIS office; to Jason and Janet and Mark; to the people who have meant so much to me during my academic career at GMU. To these men and women, I say: Thank you for being my safe place.

Wendall Dayley is a BIS Alumnus who is currently working as a Customer Service Representative for a day-labor staffing agency.

The following exceptional BIS students received our 2007 awards:

Renee Brayley, Outstanding BIS Project in the Public Interest, “Effective Health Promotion Literature: Content Analysis of New Parent Kits.” Faculty Mentor: Dr. Gary Kreps, Professor and Chair of the Department of Communications.

Foster Rockwell. The Robert T. Hawkes, Jr. Award for Outstanding BIS Project, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Diversity Training Programs.” Faculty Mentor: Dr Paige Wolf, Assistant Professor of Management, School of Management.

Charon Henning. Most Creative BIS Project, “Circus Subrosa.” Faculty Mentor: Dr. Rick Davis, Professor of Theater, Artistic Director of the Center for the Arts & Theater of the First Amendment, and Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education.

Megan Robinson. Most Creative BIS Project, “Memoir as Signpost: Writing at the Intersection of Ancient Faith and Contemporary Culture.” Faculty Mentor: Dr. Catherine Saunders, Term Assistant Professor, English Department.

Dr. Alison O’Brien, Associate Dean, School of Management, BIS Faculty Mentor Award (pictured on the next page with Shirley Watson).
Please join us in celebrating our 2008 BIS 490 Project Award Winners:

The Robert T. Hawkes, Jr. Award for Outstanding BIS Project

Shirley Watson & Faculty Mentor

Role of Information Acquisition in Organizational Socialization

Outstanding BIS Project in the Public Interest

Tracy Groves & Family

A GPS for BIS

The Most Creative Project

Wendall Dayley & Family

The Right to Rule: An Alternate History Novella

*Copies of these projects can be found at http://bis.gmu.edu/courses/bis490.php

I learned about the Oxford Honors Study Abroad Program from the Center for Global Education at George Mason University in December 2006. The Center automatically sends letters about the program during the beginning of the Spring Semester to any undergraduate student who has a 3.5 or higher GPA and any graduate student with a 3.8 and above. This letter is only an invitation to apply to the Oxford Honors Program—it does not guarantee acceptance. On average, 35-40 students are accepted to study in Oxford. Upon acceptance into the program, students can freely choose two tutorials that they will study in England.

After a lengthy application process that began in late January 2007, I learned I was accepted into the program at the beginning of April 2007. When I arrived in Oxford I studied non-fiction writing and women’s literature (students choose 4 tutorials—2 primary and 2 back-ups, the final decisions are made by Oxford and GMU professors upon arrival in England). Students spend nearly four months studying at prestigious Oxford University while earning 15 George Mason credits. Each student has two professors that they work with one-on-one. Students are expected to respond to the academic rigor that Oxford has standardized—an average week would have a student reading 3-5 books per class and writing 10-15 pages of essays per week. During my term at Oxford I learned that I could extend my stay from one term to three terms, or the entire year. I chose this option so that I could have a fuller experience as an Oxford student. After completing 6 tutorials (and beginning a book of memoirs about my time at Oxford), I arrived back in the US permanently on July 10.

I do not intend to use these credits towards my BIS degree entitled, “Acting and Writing Studies.” My BIS contract has already been written and approved, and while I could amend my contract to include my Oxford credits, I want to take all of the classes I have already agreed to take at George Mason. These classes are vital to my growth as a writer and artist.

For me, attending Oxford was just an added bonus. Well, OK, that is a huge understatement; it was an event of a lifetime. This endeavor brought me expanded opportunities in my writing career, helped me become a more informed writer, and allowed me to culturally experience an educational system and society that had been “foreign” to me.

Of course, I was initially scared to live in another country, attend another university—I was away from my husband and my friends for an extended period of time, I lived in a foreign country by myself, I had to quit my job for a time, and of course, the cost of Oxford University and my living expenses was sizeable. But, the ability to say, “I went to Oxford for a year” made the debt easier to take on. It was also imperative that I had an extremely supportive family and extended family network behind me—in fact, my husband encouraged me to apply to the program when I had excuses not to.

Two years ago I came back to George Mason after a 5 year college absence. I would never have imagined back then that I would get the opportunity to travel and study in prestigious Oxford. For all present and prospective BIS students I would say this: Just because we are only now returning to college does not place any limits on our educational opportunities. I would encourage everyone to take advantage of this opportunity if they can—You will find the money, your spouse and friends will support you, your job can wait...don’t find a reason not to go, because there isn’t one.

Jennifer Warnock is a BIS senior who is currently enrolled in BIS 390. She is happy to answer any and all questions regarding her study abroad experience. She can be contacted at jwarnock@gmu.edu.

Student Spotlight — A BIS Student in Oxford

by Jennifer Warnock

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Learning Without Limits
Reflections from an “Old Grad”  
by Julie Gearthman

During the early 1970s I was hired by GMU to be Bob Hawkes’ secretary. At that point, Bob was Assistant Director of Extended Studies and I was a not-so-gay divorcee with two young children. I’d had three years of college and could type after a fashion. Yes, I did say type, as the computer age was still a fledging novelty. I was an enthusiastic mess to begin with, but Bob put up with my limited aptitudes and encouraged me to trudge on.

As Bob moved up in his career, I tagged along. When he became Director of Continuing Education, I was given the illustrious title Coordinator of Community Services and vastly more interesting responsibilities. These added challenges included the instigation of a non-credit program which started with four courses and grew to forty during the next remarkable ten years. About the same time, the possibility of originating a non-traditional degree-granting program out of continuing education was being explored. Frances Rawls, a guidance counselor in our department, was named BIS (Bachelor of Individualized Studies) Coordinator in the mid ’70s. If this degree program became a reality, it would be a real feather in the department’s cap! Details looked logical and workable on paper, but would the program work in real life? What was needed was a living, breathing body to work his or her way through the system and iron out all the kinks. Would I like to be that guinea pig? You betcha! Here was a chance to combine my three fun-filled years of useless studies in theatre with my much more practical life experiences and actually realize a degree. I was thrilled beyond measure with the prospects. I tackled this challenge with all the gusto and enthusiasm I could muster and after months of challenging but highly interesting hard work, was awarded the very first BIS degree in May of 1976.

Two years later, I went back to school and earned a traditional MA at The American University in 1979. I retired from a highly successful career as director of development for several non-profit organizations and now live a wonderfully quiet life as the wife of a Virginia Tech professor in Blacksburg. During my lifetime, I’ve been successfully challenged many times. Earning a BIS degree was perhaps the most personally fulfilling. A zillion thanks to Bob Hawkes who put my feet on a meaningful path and kept gently but firmly shoving me along.

Support BIS!

Your contributions help us continue to enhance the BIS program. If you would like to make a financial contribution, go to http://supportingmason.gmu.edu Be sure to specify either BIS Program Fund or BIS Scholarships! Thank you for your generosity.

For information about Alumni Affairs go to: http://www.gmu.edu/alumni. Be sure to keep your information up to date.

Have you visited the Career Network Online? Visit http://careers.gmu.edu/cn/ for more information about this great resource. The Career Center on campus is also available to GMU alumni for a nominal fee. Call 703-993-2370.

Congratulations to our 2007 & 2008 Graduates & Scholarship Winners!


2007

Jennifer Warnock
Julie Curtis

2008

Ashley Morgan
Dena Nihart
Patrick Voss


Class of 2007!