

Committee on Student Standing and Programs
H a v e r f o r d C o l l e g e

Designing an Independent Major

Introduction

The Bi-Co community offers 31 departmentally-based majors. Nevertheless, recognizing that established disciplines do not necessarily encompass the totality of knowledge and that interdisciplinary study offers the possibility of fruitful discovery, the faculty has delegated to CSSP the authority to grant students permission to create independent majors. The committee wants to facilitate the achievement of the appropriate desires of Haverford students as much as possible, but it is also obligated to ensure that students address the legitimate concerns of the faculty before getting faculty approval to pursue an independent major.

Before embarking on the typically long process of trying to build an independent major, students should take account of the fact that the outside world will not necessarily look favorably on an independent major. Indeed, many graduate programs and employers find them perplexing. In addition, being an independent major can be a fairly lonely way to experience college, as there are no fellow majors with whom one can collaborate or commiserate, a fact that becomes particularly relevant in senior year.

In considering possible majors, many students will inevitably find that certain aspects of the regular departmental majors, typically the introductory and intermediate-level courses that relate to the fundamental theory and methods of a discipline, are not especially appealing, and they are anxious to get on to what they consider the important and truly challenging courses in the upper levels of a department's offerings. However, introductory courses are part of departmental majors because one cannot be said to have become broadly learned in an established discipline without attaining a reasonably firm grasp of a generally-accepted range of basic knowledge, theory, and other analytical tools distinctive to that discipline. Building an independent major is therefore much akin to the process of grafting, with a certain number of introductory and intermediate-level courses in a limited number of departmental majors serving as the "trunk" onto which one "grafts" the intermediate-level and upper-level thematic courses, potentially from a wider range of departmental offerings, that one might consider more fun and rewarding.

Every petition for an independent major contains a number of components, each of which will be discussed in the pages that follow:

1. An opening narrative essay describing the major
2. A list of courses that can be taken in fulfillment of the major
3. A four-year plan of study that lays out when the student intends to take the courses in fulfillment of the major and those that satisfy general distributional requirements.
4. Letters of support from relevant faculty members
5. An unofficial transcript

1. The Narrative

The opening narrative of your petition to CSSP should provide the title of your proposed major, the name(s) of your major adviser(s), and a discussion of how the constituent parts of your major fit together to create a coherent whole.

In order to accomplish the latter, you need to recognize that an independent major is inherently interdisciplinary, and that majors are not simply collections of thematically-related courses—again, majors seek to impart to students distinctive ways of thinking and distinctive methodologies for analyzing certain aspects of the world. Majors in economics, for instance, need to acquire an understanding of the fundamental concepts of the discipline and the basic methods of statistical analysis before they can take upper-level courses.

While you may include courses from a fairly wide array of established disciplines in the list of courses that you may take in fulfillment of your independent major, it is therefore crucial for you to identify a limited number of established disciplines that will provide you with the foundation of relevant theoretical, methodological, and/or analytical “tools” that will give rigor to your study of the upper-level courses in your major. Your narrative should explain the logic that determined which of the established disciplines will serve as the basis for your independent major—why, for instance, a proposal to study public health should be built around a core of introductory-level and intermediate-level courses in biology, anthropology, and/or sociology.

Your narrative should also explain why you cannot pursue your interests by way of the established majors, minors, and/or concentrations. This is particularly important if you propose to major in something that currently exists as a minor or concentration. Typically, fields are currently available as minors or concentrations because the faculty of the College has determined that such fields cannot “stand alone” as majors. Sometimes this is so because the college simply does not have the resources to offer the array of courses that are required to impart an acceptable foundation in the distinctive theory and methods of the field and/or its allied thematic subfields; at other times, a field is offered as a concentration or a minor because a consensus has not yet emerged that it has developed into a fully-articulated independent discipline. Students should therefore bear in mind that sometimes universities can offer as majors some fields that a small liberal arts college cannot offer for either material or philosophical reasons.

Finally, in trying to explain why you want to pursue an independent major, it is not necessarily helpful to share with the committee personal experiences that inspired your interest in the subject in which you want to major. The committee wants to understand why you think the issues that your major will examine are important, but this is best done by making reference to how the themes and the perspectives that inform the major relate to issues of broader societal or global import. In addition, while you may find it helpful to see how other institutions have structured majors that look like the major you would like to pursue, please bear in mind that CSSP’s decision-making does not hinge on what other schools permit or offer but rather on the inherent merits of what you propose to do during your time at Haverford College, your preparation for doing it, and the college’s ability to offer you appropriate academic support in the pursuit of it.

2. The List of Courses

In deciding how many courses you want in your major, you need to be mindful of the fact that you must earn 19 credits outside your major, and since you must earn a grand total of at least 32 credits in order to graduate, majors therefore typically consist of no more than 13 courses. At the same time, majors typically do not consist of fewer than 10 courses, and as a rule of thumb, students should endeavor to create independent major proposals that consist of 12-13 courses, including a thesis or other senior-year “capstone” work.

Regarding the capstone work, students interested in designing an independent major should not assume that they can incorporate existing departmental senior thesis seminars or other lab or course work designed specifically for majors in regular academic departments into their

independent majors. For a variety of legitimate reasons, many departments will not welcome independent majors into senior courses designed specifically for their own departmental majors. This being the case, if you hope to include an existing departmental senior capstone course (as opposed to a specially-designed independent study or studies) into your independent major proposal as part of your senior capstone component, CSSP will expect to see a letter in your proposal packet from the appropriate departmental chair attesting to the fact that his or her department will permit you to participate in their senior departmental capstone course(s) even though you do not intend to be one of their departmental majors.

The problem with coming up with a list of courses that can be taken in fulfillment of the requirements of a major is that unforeseeable factors might prevent you from being able to take those courses in the future. Courses are sometimes canceled in any given semester or eliminated altogether from the College Catalog for any number of reasons. In addition, in a few years time, you may find that one of your major courses is being offered at a time that conflicts with the meeting times of other courses you must take. For these and other reasons, while you cannot take more than 13 courses in fulfillment of your major, it is advantageous to identify a longer menu of courses from which those 13 could be chosen as you move through your academic career.

However, no major consists of two or three dozen courses from which one might randomly pick any given dozen or so—majors are structured programs of study, and as such, your choice of courses as you work your way through a major is structured in a variety of ways. Generally speaking, majors consist of one to three 100-level courses, three to five 200-level courses, three or more 300-levels, and a senior “capstone” consisting of a seminar, thesis, and/or senior project carried out for one or two credits.

Many majors have a core of introductory courses that all students must take; sometimes these courses are narrowly prescribed (e.g., “all majors must take 100, 101, and 205”) and sometimes they are organized in submenus from which one must choose a certain number (e.g., “all majors must take two of the following: 100, 101, and 102; and two of the following: 110, 111, and 112”). Other majors simply say that you must take a certain number of 100-level, 200-level, and 300-level courses.

Some majors also organize course selections into subtopics and require that students fulfill distributional requirements within the major by taking a certain number of courses in a certain number of subfields. For instance, political science identifies four subfields—American politics, comparative politics, international politics, and political theory—and requires majors to take introductory-level courses in two of these subfields and eight additional courses beyond the introductory level in three of these four subfields.

Once you have developed the internal logic of your proposed major and organizational structure that it necessitates, you can then organize more than 13 courses that you *can* take in fulfillment of the major into the submenus that will give you choice and flexibility in the future. Wherever you want to build such flexibility into your list you should offer a submenu roughly comparable to the following: “Department X 100 **or** Department X 101 **or** Department Y 140.” Thus, a fictionalized list of the 100-level and 200-level courses for a major (which includes courses one *must* take along with menus from which one can choose) might look like the following:

Department X 101
 Department X 110 **or** Department X 115
 Department Y 139 **or** Department Z 155
 Department X 200 **or** 220 **or** Department X 255
 Department X 255

Department Z 280
Department Z 295 or Department Z 296 or Department D 272 or Department Y
280

If you identify certain courses as alternatives to one another, please be sure that you understand your own logic for doing so—that is, what are the characteristics that “Department Z 295 or Department Z 296 or Department D 272 or Department Y 280” (to use the fictional example above) share? Put another way, what is the shared purpose or function of taking any of these courses, or what subfield within your major do they cover? You do not necessarily have to offer an explanation of every single submenu in your major; you should do so only when you think the relationship between the courses in a submenu is likely not to be obvious to an average person, but in all other circumstances, it should suffice just to be prepared to explain your logic to the committee if it asks.

If your major is science-related, it must contain a foundation of basic mathematics or include courses that require you already to have acquired basic college-level mathematical skills. Wherever appropriate, science-related majors should also include lab components, although “superlab” is not necessarily required for major proposals that incorporate biology courses, particularly if you do not intend to apply for graduate work that will involve lab-based research.

One of the most common reasons why students have difficulty keeping the number of courses in an independent major below 13 is that they often feel obligated to count all prerequisite courses as part of their majors. However, if you find that you have more than 13 courses in your major, you can simply leave prerequisites off the list of courses that count toward your major; for instance, if you want organic chemistry to be part of your independent major, you do not necessarily have to include in your list of major courses the introductory chemistry that you had to take as prerequisites for organic chemistry.

3. The Plan of Study

It is one thing to identify the courses that you *can* eventually take, but identifying when you will actually take these courses is another issue altogether. For instance, it may very well be that, in practice, many of the courses you want to take in fulfillment of your major requirements tend to meet at the same times as other courses you need to take for your major or for general distributional (i.e., NA, SO, HU, Social Justice, etc.) purposes. It is for this reason that you will be required to file a detailed plan of study showing when you might take courses in fulfillment of your major and distributional requirements.

A detailed plan of study is not an unalterable contract. It is instead a declaration of intention and an exercise to demonstrate to yourself and to the committee that you are cognizant of and have considered strategies for dealing with at least some of the complications you may encounter in pursuing your remaining graduation requirements.

Your plan of study should identify, semester by semester and year by year, beginning with fall semester of your freshman year, all of the courses you have taken or intend to take in fulfillment of your major and your distributional requirements. When putting together this plan of study, please identify your major courses with an asterisk (*) and your distributional requirements with the appropriate symbol placed in parentheses, and enumerate, where appropriate, the courses you might take as alternatives for your major in any given term. A plan of study might look, in part, something like this:

Sophomore Year, Spring TermDepartment X 110 **or** Department X 115 *

Department Z 165 *

Spanish 102 (foreign language requirement)

English 205 (HU)

Whenever students are asked to put together plans of study they are frequently, and understandably, perplexed as to how they can determine when a course is going to be offered in the future. This is admittedly not easy, but you can get some approximate sense of what will happen in the future by bearing the following in mind:

- Courses tend to be offered in either spring or fall term—that is, while they may not be offered every single year, they tend to be offered in the same semester in years in which they actually are offered.
- The *College Catalog* will sometimes contain a notation, at the bottom of a course description, indicating that a course will not be offered in a certain year, and sometimes it will specify the year in which it will next be offered.
- Certain foundational or introductory-level courses are offered annually—you can identify such courses by checking the requirements for a major, and if all majors are required to take a particular course, it is usually safe to say that the department will continue to offer that course every year into the near future.
- If you have any questions about whether a course is likely to be offered in the future, you may want to consult the person currently offering the course, the appropriate department chair, and/or the Registrar.

Finally, please include with your proposal the description of any courses from outside the bi-co community that you would like to count toward your major. This is particularly important if you would like to count courses taken while studying abroad toward your major.

4. Letters of Support

You should submit with your petition to CSSP a letter from the professor who has agreed to supervise your major; if more than one professor is going to help supervise you, then all such professors should write in support of your petition.

You should provide your proposed major advisers with a copy of your transcript, the narrative you have written describing your major, your list of major courses, and your plan of study. You are also encouraged to ask them for any advice they have regarding how you might improve your petition before sending it to CSSP for consideration. Your recommenders can be most helpful if they address the following issues:

- The merits of your proposal
- Your preparation for success in the pursuit of your major
- Any insight into why you cannot pursue your objectives within the framework of the existing rubrics (i.e., the existing majors, minors, and/or concentrations)

Additional letters—that is, letters submitted by those *other than* the faculty member(s) who will serve as your major adviser(s)—are welcome only if they address in specific detail your intellectual maturity, your potential for working autonomously, or the merits of your proposal in light of current academic debates.

5. Your Transcript

You do not need to submit an official copy of your transcript—an unofficial copy pulled down from the web will suffice. Although the college rules do not establish a minimum GPA to qualify for an independent major, CSSP will tend to look most favorably upon the petitions of applicants who have achieved at least a 3.5 cumulative GPA. There are several reasons why your GPA may be relevant to the decision the committee will make. As an independent major, you will need to exercise a lot of autonomy. Although you will have an adviser, you will not have the support and resources that a department can provide you, and your courses will inevitably be taught from the perspective of the professor's discipline and with the needs of the professor's major program, not yours, in mind. You will therefore have to exercise an unusually high level of autonomy as an independent major, and a reasonably high level of success in your course work, as measured, in part, by good grades in challenging courses, is one way to measure your potential in this regard.

CSSP's Decision

Getting approval to pursue an independent major is not guaranteed; apart from independent majors in computer science (an unusual category of independent major, as it is one with its own department and a recognized curriculum), only a small handful of students, sometimes no more than 2-3 in any given class of approximately 300 students, graduate as independent majors. Much hard work can go into the drafting of a petition only to result in an opinion from the committee that the very concept on which the petition is founded may not be workable at some basic level. In addition, even those who succeed frequently do so only after 1-2 drafts. Students interested in pursuing independent majors should therefore be prepared to be in dialogue with CSSP for one semester or more before gaining final approval, if in fact their petitions are going to be approved at all.

An independent major will consist of courses offered by a sometimes fairly wide array of departments, but it must have at its core a number of introductory-level and intermediate-level courses from only one to three departments. *Particularly if you wait until spring term of your sophomore year to begin this process*, you should therefore be prepared to declare one of those departments as your major department in the spring of sophomore year and to select courses for fall term that fit into both the requirements of your independent major and of the departmental major you have at least temporarily chosen. This will help minimize the extent to which you will have to take courses in the fall of the junior year that might end up as electives outside your major.

Finally, please bear in mind that independent major petitions fail to gain approval for a variety of reasons, among which the following are the most common:

- Failure to explain adequately why the established departmental majors or minors, or concentrations, will not address their intellectual interests and how their proposed program will accomplish their purposes
- Failure to explain how their proposed program of study constitutes a coherent body of knowledge and/or to identify appropriate analytical tools for pursuing the major
- Failure to structure adequately their list of major courses and/or offering a list of major courses that is either too large and unstructured or too small and restrictive
- Excessively narrow focus
- Inadequate upper-level course content and/or lack of senior “capstone” work (i.e., thesis or senior seminar) that ties together the work done in the first three years of study