

Carnegie Mellon University

Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Student-Defined Major Program: Proposal Guidelines and Procedures

QUESTION: What specifications must one follow in assembling and submitting a student-defined proposal? In other words, what does a proposal look like? What parts must it contain? What format must be followed?

In their general appearance, student-defined major or minor proposals should resemble the format used in the university catalog to profile any of the college's majors or minors. Each student-defined major or minor proposal draft should include:¹

1. *A Cover Page* with the proposed major title, a notation of which draft [#1, #4, #6, etc.] this is, your name, campus/local address and phone (including cell phone number, if you have one), home [permanent] address and phone, current class, college and major, and the date.
2. *Introduction.* A brief, one-paragraph statement that you propose to pursue a student-defined major or minor in “_____” (provide a preliminary title), and identify the areas of study that you will combine to form this major. State clearly (but briefly) what your educational objectives are for this major or minor, and why you feel that it is not possible for you to attain these objectives in the context of existing programs in Dietrich College or elsewhere in the university.

If the proposal is for a primary student-defined major, indicate whether this major will be a bachelor of science or a bachelor of arts (refer to the Dietrich College section of the university catalog for the distinctions between these two degree options).

3. *Major Description and Rationale.* This is a clear, concise presentation of the proposed program's organizing ideas. "Definitions" are usually necessary here for "the field" of study reflected in the proposed major or minor. (What, in other words, *is* this field of study, and what subfields combine to form it?) Describe the theoretical framework within which the courses are to be placed for this major or minor.

¹ For illustrations of some of these components, see the "Sample Format" later in this Guide.

This discussion should use as organizing ideas the same concepts that will emerge later as categorical headings and subheadings that organize the curriculum section. It should describe and establish the importance (to this major or minor) of the fields of study reflected in the courses to be taken in the curriculum, and the role(s) that each subfield will play in achieving the unique synthesis to which the student-defined major or minor aspires. State clearly and concisely the role that each course category plays in the program's larger conceptual scheme, and the role that each course plays within its own course category. It should also be clear which areas of study are "primary" to the major or minor, and which are "subsidiary," and why; similarly, which courses (in each category) are "required," and which are "distributional," and why. This serves the important function of connecting your prose description of the major or minor with the "Curriculum" to follow. In this regard, make sure that the curriculum reflects the same emphases stressed in the rationale. For example, if in the rationale you argue that a major in "East Asian Studies" stresses breadth of national and cultural foci, make sure that courses listed under this category are comparably broad (e.g., not just Chinese history). Finally, you must establish why your educational objectives in this major or minor are not attainable through any one or combination of existing major or minor programs in the college or university.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly how important *precision* and *clarity* are in this section. Remember that it is probably the case that you envision a complex and synthetic major or minor that the reader does not, but it is *the reader* who must be persuaded that this is a coherent proposal. Keep this in mind, and take nothing for granted by the reader. Do not be sparing in the detail offered to describe the program's central organizing ideas, how these ideas relate to each other, and how the courses in the curriculum operationalize these ideas. If you make statements that different fields of study reinforce or complement each other, *explain* this relationship (and give examples). Do not make the reader work harder than he or she should to decipher the synthesis you are presenting. Otherwise, the reader will almost certainly *say* that he or she does not understand, pass it back, and ask for another draft.

Proofread your draft carefully. Drafts with misspellings, incomplete sentences, or non-sequiturs will receive a quick and chilly reception. *Taking time to do this carefully and clearly will save you time in the end.*

4. *Curriculum.* This is a complete outline of all courses that will comprise the requirements for the major or minor. (College general education courses should not be included in this presentation of the proposed program's curriculum.) These courses should be categorized in two ways: first, according to that component of the major or minor program to which

each belongs (e.g., mathematics prerequisites; research methods; etc.), noting which are "required" and which are "distributional" (i.e., a subset of courses to be chosen from a master list of courses), and providing in each case the course's number and name; and second, a semester-by-semester outline that indicates when each course is to be taken (or, for any already taken, when taken and grade received). (See the "Sample Curriculum" later in this guide) In addition to courses taken at Carnegie Mellon University, the program's curriculum may include courses taken (or to be taken) at other schools, through related projects or internships, or studying abroad. Eventually, any such non-Carnegie Mellon University courses (whether already taken or to be taken) must receive formal approval from the college before credits can be assigned to one's program of study.

5. *Unit Summary.* A numerical listing of units for each course category in your program (e.g., "Mathematics Prerequisites," "Major Requirements," "Electives"). (See "Sample Unit Summary" later in this guide) The minimum requirement for graduation is, as with all majors in the college, 360 units of credit.
6. *Expected Completion/Graduation Date.* An explicit statement of the month and year when you plan/expect to graduate with this degree and major.

In addition, you should attach to each draft the following items:

- Any semester or summer term grade reports for any Carnegie Mellon University courses that do not appear on the transcript.
- A current photocopy of transcripts and grade reports for any non-Carnegie Mellon University courses that are not reflected on your Carnegie Mellon transcript
- Course descriptions of any non-Carnegie Mellon University courses taken, and some indication from you regarding how you would propose to apply these courses in the context of your proposed Dietrich College program [i.e., as major requirements, or simply as electives]).

Finally, each student-defined proposal draft should be double-spaced, with 1 1/2-inch margins.

QUESTION: Are there issues that must be addressed in a student-defined major or minor proposal that are not generally addressed (or not as thoroughly addressed) in catalog descriptions and profiles of the college's conventional majors and minors?

Most definitely, yes. There are **five** critical issues that you must address in a student-defined major or minor proposal. These issues comprise perhaps *the* most important set

of criteria used in evaluating student-defined proposals. These issues (and the questions we use in evaluating proposals to probe these issues) are:

1. Coherence. Do all of the major's or minor's intellectual components, when taken together, comprise a coherent program of study? Are there complementary central themes to which each category makes unique contributions, avoiding any obvious gaps? Does the proposed major or minor avoid the appearance of being rather more like a smorgasbord of unrelated (or distantly related) areas of study? Does the proposed major or minor have notable gaps in its foci?
2. Suitability as a *Dietrich College* Major or Minor. Almost by definition, student-defined majors or minors are *interdisciplinary*, and often include courses from outside the college. However, in order to be acceptable as a *Dietrich College* student-defined major or minor, your program of study must, in its essence, be a program that has an intellectual "home" in Dietrich College. In other words, the program of study must make sense as something that Dietrich College would sponsor, and cannot at its core be an interdisciplinary program that does not reflect any significant intellectual component of the college (i.e., the humanities, the social sciences, or the behavioral sciences). By this criterion the college insists that its student-defined program is not a "catch-all" for students who have interdisciplinary interests, but whose colleges will not allow them to self-define a major or minor (e.g., proposing to self-define a "Theater Management" major that combines drama and business).
3. Suitability as a *student-defined* major or minor. Explain why it is not possible to accomplish the educational objectives of the proposed major or minor through one or more of the college's existing major, or major/minor, programs.
4. Viability. Given available faculty, courses, and other resources, is the proposed major or minor a viable course of study? For example, are the program's "required courses" offered regularly, and will you be able to take them (i.e., are they restricted to students in certain majors, or in such high demand that students outside certain majors are seldom able to enter them?)? Are there courses and faculty available in the areas of study reflected in the proposed major or minor?
5. Suitable *Depth* and *Breadth*. In general, majors in Dietrich College must consist of *at least* nine 9-unit courses. (Most consist of considerably more.) Minors generally consist of at least 54 units. In addition, majors and minors should reflect a balance of *theory* and *application*, or *practice* (e.g., if your interest is some variation of "verbal and visual communication," you should include courses in visual and linguistic theory as well as "applied" courses in studio design and writing). Furthermore, course categories should be

relatively "balanced" (i.e., they should include comparable unit levels). In most cases, each should contain some "required" courses (courses that *must* be taken), and other "distributional" courses (a subset of courses chosen from an approved list).

QUESTION: Are there any special requirements that student-defined majors or minors must fulfill after a proposal has been approved and one has entered the program?

Yes, at least two:

1. *Junior-senior paper.* A paper, preferably written during the summer between the junior and senior year (but submitted no later than one semester before graduating), in which you describe how your perception(s) of the major's or minor's "synthesis" has evolved since you began pursuing its curriculum. In essence, this amounts to a re-write of the "Overview" and "Program Description and Rationale" of the original proposal.
2. *Semester meeting.* At least once per semester, after registration for the subsequent semester, each student-defined major or minor must arrange to meet with the program director to review requirements completed and remaining, and to make any needed adjustments to the approved program curriculum.