

# Student Designed Major (SDM) Guidelines

*Administered by the Office of the  
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs (862-3290)*

## Introduction

In March 1971, the University Senate approved a proposal, made by a Council of Educational Innovation, for student designed majors. Following that action the Committee of Student Designed Majors was established and charged with the responsibility of administering and overseeing it.

The purpose of a Student Designed Major (SDM) proposal is to provide a route by which highly motivated and independently disciplined students can systematically pursue a course of study that is not available through existing programs (majors) at the University. The proposal should include study of an issue, problem, or area of intellectual concern in some depth, and not be a general studies program.

The SDM should be appreciably different from any major available on campus. The student's proposal must be coherent and unified, rather than a collection of elective courses. In other words, the student must be able to articulate what his or her "major" is, and to demonstrate that the "whole is greater than the sum of the parts".

The SDM cannot be used to avoid those portions of an existing major that are uninteresting or presumed to be too difficult. For example, the SDM cannot consist of all of the courses of an existing major with one or two substitutions.

The SDM will typically consist of courses from at least two or three existing disciplines (e.g. Psychology, History, Chemistry), with a reasonable mix of each. A SDM cannot consist of a concentration or subspecialty within a recognized major, e.g. 18th Century English Literature.

## I. What To Know Before You Begin

- GPA: Generally students should not apply for the SDM with less than a **3.0 average**.
- Discovery Requirements: The SDM student must fulfill University Discovery and Inquiry course requirements. (See Form A of the application form.)
- Academic Content: The intellectual and academic content of a SDM must be comparable to other majors. For instance, an appropriate number of advanced courses must be taken to provide depth and rigor to the student's program. At least one upper level Writing Intensive (WI) course must be taken as well.
- Independent Study: It is completely appropriate for the SDM to include one or two Independent Studies. A thorough study plan for each Independent Study must be included. (See Appendix I for guidelines on writing the Independent Study proposal.)
- Course Enrollment: One difficulty faced by SDM students can be securing entrance into courses that have limited enrollments. If a limited enrollment course is part of your proposed coursework, the instructor's signature must be obtained. (See Form A of the application.)

- Supervision: A faculty member must agree to serve as the student's advisor.

## II. How to Begin

### A. Thoroughly read the guidelines and application form

### B. Plan your program

1. Conceptually define what the major is.
2. Discuss your proposed major with a prospective advisor - this should be a faculty member who has an expertise in the subject area of your proposed major. (See Section V. The SDM Advisor's Role).
3. Research other institutions that offer your proposed major or a similar program and review their requirements.

## III. Preparation of the Proposal

Each proposal for a Student Designed Major must include all of the following information in the order indicated.

### A. Cover Sheet

### B. SDM Proposal Checklist

### C. Description of Proposed Major: (The faculty advisor should review Sections 1-4 prior to submission.)

#### Section 1: Narrative. (usually 2-4 pages)

- Describe the general nature and purpose of the proposed major, answering such questions as: What theme ties your major together? What are the goals of your proposed major? How will this major contribute to your intellectual development and future career plans?
- Present evidence that your proposed major could not be accomplished through the presently established majors, minors, and dual majors at the University.

#### Section 2: Form A. Major Course List and Discovery, Inquiry and WI Requirements

- List the courses composing the proposed major. Independent study courses should be described in detail on a separate page or pages for each proposed independent study. (See Appendix I for guidelines on writing the Independent Study proposal.)
- List the Discovery, Inquiry and Writing Intensive (WI) Requirements.
- Obtain instructors' permission signatures, where required.

#### Section 3: Form B. Course Sequence

- Prepare a list of the sequence of courses completed, in progress, and planned. Form B is a

semester-by-semester list of all courses you will have taken for your degree.

**Section 4: Specify a Capstone Experience. According to the UNH catalog:**

- “The Capstone experience is typically completed by senior students within the major and is designed to elicit opportunities for educational reflection and synthesis of knowledge and skills; however, students who have completed 90 credits at the end of their junior year may complete their Capstone the summer prior to their senior year. The Capstone may be met with an approved experience (as described below). It is not necessarily a course.
- Suggested ways of meeting Capstone may include: McNair Research Theses, Hamel Center Programs (IROP, SURF USA, SURF Abroad, URA, INCO 790), and Senior Honors Theses. Examples of Capstone experiences include courses, projects, independent research, internships, artistic expression, or community and service learning opportunities.”

**Section 5: Form C. Documentation of Similar Courses**

- Provide a list of core courses from at least two comparable institutions where your desired major or a similar program is offered. These lists are an important source of documentation for the SDM Committee that similar majors exist elsewhere.

**D. Supporting documents**

*Item 1:* Transcript of the Student’s Academic Record (copy from the Registrar/download).

*Item 2:* A letter from the faculty member who has agreed to serve as the advisor for the student-designed major. This document should indicate why he/she approves this course of study, what evidence he/she has that the student will complete the program successfully, and whether he/she expects to be on the Durham campus during the full course of study.

*Item 3:* (If applicable) A letter from each person with whom the student intends to take independent study or do an internship. The letter should indicate approval of the study in question and indicate that he/she expects to be available at the appropriate times.

**Submit the completed proposal to: Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Room 207 Thompson Hall.**

## **IV. Timing and Deadlines**

- A. Students should begin planning for their designed major in their sophomore year.
  1. Find an advisor and work with him/her to draft the proposal for the Committee.
  2. Plan the courses to be taken for each semester until graduation.
- B. All proposals should be submitted at least by the beginning of the student’s junior year. The committee **strongly** recommends that students submit early in the fall in order to allow for any

possible proposal revision requests. **Fall submissions are due by October 15 of the student's junior year.** Proposals are only reviewed once a semester. If the proposal is late, it will be deferred to the spring submissions. **Spring submissions are due by February 25.**  
**Under no circumstances will the committee consider a senior year proposal.**

- C. Upon approval, initiate a transfer into the college of your SDM advisor if necessary by filling out a "Change of Program Form" available from the Registrar's Office.
- D. A student will be required to complete at least two full semesters of study after the approval of the SDM.
- E. Any substantive changes to the approved course of study must be reviewed by the SDM Committee. (See Appendix II.)

## V. The SDM Advisor's Role (Be sure to review this section with your advisor)

- A. The Advisor's role includes:
- Helping the student develop the major
  - Being available to discuss ideas or troubleshoot problems with the student
  - Serving as a professional colleague, similar to the relationship of faculty and student in a traditional major
  - Certifying that the student has carried out the program as approved (see Section VI. Graduation Procedure). The Advisor is responsible for reviewing any changes to the major. These proposed changes must be sent in writing to the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs for final approval.
- B. The SDM Committee expects that the Advisor and the student will meet regularly throughout the period when the student is completing his/her major.
- C. Upon completion of the major, the SDM Committee would appreciate receiving comments from the Advisor on the effectiveness of the Student Designed Major.

## VI. Graduation Procedure

- A. The Registrar's Office monitors individual progress toward completion of the University academic requirements (128 credits, cumulative average, and discovery requirements). As the student nears completion, the Registrar's Office will issue a degree analysis to both the student and the SDM Advisor.
- B. The student then must file Intent to Graduate Form with the Registrar.
- C. The SDM Advisor will receive a Certificate of Completion of Major Requirements for Graduation that must be returned to the Registrar.
- D. The Committee would appreciate receiving a letter from the student expressing his/her reflections on the SDM just completed. We are interested in learning about such topics as:
1. In what ways was the SDM satisfying and fruitful?
  2. In what ways did it fall short of your hopes and expectations?
  3. What advice would you give to other students contemplating a SDM?
  4. What suggestions do you have for the Committee?

## VII. Committee Membership and Role

- A. The SDM Committee consists of eight faculty members; four are elected by the College of Liberal Arts, and one by each of the other four colleges/schools. The Committee elects its own Chairperson from among its membership.
- B. The role of the Committee is to administer and oversee the SDM in concert with the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

This includes:

- 1. Establishing operating procedures
  - 2. Facilitating the use of the program by qualified students
  - 3. Assisting individuals who become interested in the program
  - 4. Reviewing and approving applications
- C. Upon receipt of a student's application, one SDM Committee member is assigned by the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs to act as Interviewer. This committee member has primary responsibility to go over the application in depth with the student.
- D. The entire Committee meets to discuss the applications.

Four outcomes are possible:

- 1. Approval
  - 2. Hold pending clarification or additional information
  - 3. Return application to the student for revision and resubmission  
(In this case, the Interviewer acts as a liaison between the Committee and the student)
  - 4. Rejection of proposal
- E. Upon approval, the Interviewer issues a letter of approval to the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. A formal approval letter will be distributed to the student, his/her advisor, the Registrar, the Dean, and the Chair of the SDM Committee.

## APPENDIX I

### **Written Plan for Independent Study or Internship**

1. **Requirement:** The Committee on Student Designed Majors requires that SDM applications which specify an independent study or internship as part of the program include a written study plan for each internship or independent study.
2. **Purpose:** The written plan ensures that the Independent Study or Internship is well designed and in a format that the Committee can evaluate. A thoughtful plan, with clear educational objectives, demonstrates thoroughness in designing the course of study or internship experience and will enhance the educational value of the project.
3. **Content:** Each plan should include each of the following:
  - a) *Statement of Educational Objectives.* What will be accomplished by the project? This might include the issues to be explored, the questions to be answered, the skills to be developed, and/or the hypothesis to be tested.
  - b) *Description of Method.* How will you proceed? What activities will you carry out? What information will you gather and by what means (readings, questionnaires, observation)? What will be your main sources of information?
  - c) *End Product.* What will be the end product of the project? Although many projects will lead to a written report, other end products, such as public presentation, can be appropriate.
  - d) *Schedule.* What are your target dates for completing the major phases of the project (e.g., data gathering, data analysis, report writing)?
  - e) *Project Advisor.* Who will be the faculty advisor on the project and what will his/her role be? Both internships and independent studies should have a faculty member serving as advisor. This advisor can be different from the SDM Advisor. The role of the independent study or internship faculty advisor can vary. You should indicate how often you expect to meet with your advisor and explain what type of guidance you will receive from him/her.
  - f) *Internship Information.* In the case of an internship, the plan should identify the organization in which you will be working and indicate what kind of educational guidance you will receive from the organization.
  - g) *Criteria for Evaluation.* What are the criteria that will be used to arrive at the final grade?
  - h) *Approval.* The plan should be signed by your project advisor to indicate his/her approval of the plan and willingness to serve as advisor.
  - i) *Letters of Intent.* Letters from your independent study faculty and any non-faculty supervisors indicating their availability and willingness to participate.
4. **Completeness:** The Committee urges you to be as specific and thorough in your plan as possible. It is possible that a plan written today may not be accurate when enacted 3 or 4 semesters from now. Nevertheless, it is important to develop as complete a plan as possible, spelling out any alternatives or potential problems you can recognize at this time.

## APPENDIX II

### **Changes to an Approved SDM**

1. A “minor” revision may be approved by your advisor. In such an event the student must submit a letter (countersigned by the advisor) to the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs outlining the change. A minor revision is one that involves no substantial change in the program. For example, the substitution of one course for another in a related area. Please provide complete information about the revision, e.g. course number, department, course title and number of credits of both courses.
2. A “major” revision must be approved by the SDM Committee. In such an event the student must submit a letter (countersigned by the advisor) to the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs (where appropriate include revised Forms A&B) for distribution to the Committee for review.

Each of the following constitutes a major change:

- a) Dropping a course from those listed as constituting the major, without substitution of an equivalent course
  - b) Substituting other courses for more than one of the courses listed as constituting the major
  - c) Substituting another course for one that can be considered a “key” course among those constituting the major
  - d) Making any change that disrupts the balance of courses that constitute the major
3. Upon receipt and approval of the changes by the SDM Committee, a revised approval letter will be issued and distributed to the student, his/her advisor, the Registrar, Dean, and the Chair of the SDM Committee.

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