New Majors

Proposals for new majors in Yale College must be approved by the Committee on Majors before being submitted to the Yale College faculty meeting for consideration. Majors may be organized through FAS departments, councils of the MacMillan Center, committees appointed by the Dean of Yale College, or any combination of these. Some majors are governed by a partnership between FAS departments, and others are administered in collaboration with professional school departments.

The establishment of an additional major faces a high bar. Compared to most peer institutions, Yale College already offers an unusually large number of majors: more than 70, or perhaps 125 if one counted all the different tracks, B.A. or B.S. options, and other variants of approved programs. In addition, through the Special Divisional Major, Yale College offers students the opportunity to create their own major. Internal and external review committees have questioned whether Yale College has too many majors. One committee report noted:

[H]aving a large number of majors can cause three distinct kinds of problems. First, if a college spreads its resources too thinly, too many majors can come to be scantily provisioned or indifferently administered. Second, a curriculum can become overspecialized. A certain breadth of knowledge should inform any liberal arts major, both to gear it appropriately to a real academic discipline or disciplines and to prepare its students appropriately for the outside world. Third, a major ordinarily exacts costs of various kinds: a DUS, secretarial support, space, computers and other equipment, sometimes part-time or non-ladder instructors needed to teach special courses, and (perhaps the least visible yet potentially most serious cost) the subtraction of faculty members, teaching fellows, courses, and energy from the offerings of other instructional programs.

The considerations are not merely fiscal, but also intellectual. According to the founding documents for the Committee on Majors, “an undergraduate major should be created or sustained only if it can be centered in a community of discourse among scholars at Yale that promises, in the judgment of the Yale College faculty, a distinctive advancement of knowledge.”

The procedure for proposing a new major is summarized below:

- The process should begin with a petition to the chair and the secretary of the Committee on Majors, in which the faculty members of a proposed major specify its content and purpose, specifically addressing the question of why such needs cannot be met in an existing major. The outline of such a petition can be found in PDF format in the Appendix section.
- Before the petition can be brought to the Committee on Majors, a representative of the FAS Dean’s Office and the director of the Teaching Fellow program in the Graduate School should report to the committee as to the cost-impact of creating the new major and summarize the assets—human, physical, and financial—that are available to offset those costs. Costs to be assessed for the foreseeable future of a major should include administrative support, space, equipment, any special instructional equipment or facility needs.
- The requirements of the proposed major should be comparable in number to closely-related majors in Yale College and should include courses from the introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels, including a senior requirement such as a capstone course that entails independent research or small group projects.
- Sometimes a proposed new major will need to draw on the resources of one or more existing majors or programs. As part of the approval process, a “memorandum of understanding” documenting commitments to help sustain the new major should be subscribed to by the chairs of any likely donor departments and submitted to the Committee on Majors. Such commitments might include, for example, responsibility for furnishing through the foreseeable future DUSes, instructors, teaching fellows, access to limited-enrollment courses sponsored by other departments, and other departmental resources.
- If a proposed new major is recommended to the faculty for approval, the endorsement will normally be limited to an initial period of five years. In the penultimate year, the major should undertake a self-study and undergo review by the Committee on Majors. At that point, the committee might recommend the major (with or without modifications to its requirements) for renewal for five more years, renewal without term, or termination.

Questions arising from proposals to establish a new major should be addressed to Dean (nilakshi.parndigamage@yale.edu) Nilakshi Parndigamage, secretary of the Committee on Majors.