

Since the spring of 2008, the Committee on Majors has conducted extensive study and discussion in response to a proposal (brought to us by members of the faculty) to offer minors in Yale College. As summarized in more detail below, the Committee canvassed faculty opinion, surveyed Directors of Undergraduate Studies and asked them to discuss the matter with their departmental faculties. The Committee received a report from the Yale College Council and met with Directors of Undergraduate Studies and Chairs of several departments and with representatives of the Yale College Dean's Office and the Provost's Office. Dean's Office staff communicated with counterparts at peer institutions about their minor programs. A thorough discussion at the Yale College Faculty Meeting of May 7, 2009 aired a diversity of views. The Committee emerged from these explorations with a firm consensus against the introduction of minors at this time. This view has been shared by three successive committees (2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10) representing a wide range of departmental affiliations.

Committee Views

The Committee is skeptical of the value of introducing minors in Yale College. It is unclear that minors would constitute an intellectually rigorous academic experience; they seem to encourage the gathering of credentials for credentials' sake; and they might have negative unintended consequences for the broader Yale curriculum. In addition, they involve an expenditure of administrative resources that is ill-advised in a climate of economic uncertainty and already strained resources. Broad arguments for and against minors are summarized on pages 3-4 below. While the Committee does not endorse the creation of minors, we do recommend a thorough discussion of the possibility of minors, certificates, or similar programs in the context of a broader review of the Yale College curriculum next year, and in light of the report of this year's New England Association of Schools and Colleges reaccreditation, whether or not the faculty ultimately embraces minors.

- 1 Given the lack of resources for launching a new program of minors at this time, the divided state of opinion on the matter, the large number of unknown factors, the high probability of unintended consequences, and the imminence of a broader curricular review, the Committee recommends that further consideration of the establishment of minors await the review of the curricular changes introduced by the Committee on Yale College Education (CYCE).**
- 2 The Committee recommends that the process of reviewing the impact of the CYCE, beginning in September 2010, include consideration of options including minors or certificate programs as part of a holistic review of the undergraduate curriculum.**
- 3 The Committee recommends that, before the faculty undertakes any further exploration of a minor or certificate program, the problem of variation in the number of requirements in existing majors and the question of double majors should be given further consideration.**

Discussion

The Committee's primary concern is the excellence of undergraduate education at Yale. Nonetheless, a number of practical considerations are involved in the contemplation of a system of minors.

A central motivation for proposing minors seems to be the hope that they would help departments with shrinking enrollments to attract students. The Committee noted that the total number of courses taken by Yale students is unlikely to change significantly, so new enrollments encouraged by minors will necessarily take away enrollment from other fields; the result in any given department is unpredictable. It is quite possible that good elective courses will suffer enrollment declines as they are replaced by courses required for minors.

Yale students have shown a tendency to concentrate in a very small number of majors—most major in one of the six big majors, while a minority are spread unevenly across the other 70 or so majors. There is no strong evidence that minors would counteract this tendency; indeed, some additional students might pursue minors in the six big departments if these were offered.

At the moment, the larger majors are not eager to offer minors. The six biggest majors in terms of enrollment are: History, Political Science, Economics, Psychology, English, and the MCDB track within the Biology major. Of the faculty in these majors, none offered unqualified support to minors last year and most were strongly opposed. It is true that minors could be offered only in smaller departments, but there would be an essential arbitrariness to any attempt to designate what size or type of department would be permitted to offer a minor and student demand would likely result in the eventual introduction of minors across the board. If minors were not offered in the six biggest departments, students who would otherwise double major might continue to major in the big departments and then switch their second major (in a smaller department) to a minor. The alternative of certificates in language, literature, and culture does seem intellectually defensible and involves fewer of the difficulties involved in a broader system of minors.

Apart from the six big departmental majors, several of the next most popular majors are interdisciplinary (International Studies; Ethics, Politics, and Economics; Literature; American Studies; Theater Studies; Ethnicity, Race, and Migration); it is hard to see how an interdisciplinary major might also run an effective minor program, and most of the interdisciplinary majors were uninterested in pursuing one. The Committee found that peer institutions offering minors generally offered far fewer majors—it might be necessary to decrease the number of majors offered or to do away with double majors in order to make resources available for minors.

For several of the big majors, it seems apparent that concerns about career preparation drive students' choices. Students planning to go into business often study Economics; those planning to go to Medical School study Biology or Psychology; those planning to go to Law School study Political Science and to a lesser degree History and English. This career-orientation of a large segment, perhaps a majority, of Yale students may be unavoidable. The question facing the faculty, then, is how best to ensure that, even as students choose their courses with an eye to future careers, they also get the best possible education in the liberal arts and sciences. Faculty on both sides of the minors question seem to agree that this is a fundamental problem.

Some departments have proposed minors that have a high number of requirements (as high as 12 credits). In such departments, the majors as currently structured are quite demanding in terms of the number of credits needed (as compared to large majors like Political Science, History, and Economics, which require only 11 or 12 credits for a major). The Committee considers it desirable that major requirements should converge so that most majors (with Engineering majors a notable exception) at Yale would require between 12 and 16 credits. The Committee recommends further study of this question.

The Committee perceives a systemic problem that students are not being advised (or choose to ignore the advice) to sample the rich tapestry of course offerings in Yale College. The key issue in the selection of courses and majors may be lack of effective advising, rather than the absence of additional formal programs.

Overview of Arguments in Favor of Minors

The following arguments have been presented in favor of minors:

- 1 Minors might encourage students to organize their non-major, non-distributional requirement courses;
- 2 Minors might help some departments with small numbers of majors to increase their enrollments;
- 3 Minors might counteract the trend towards pre-professionalism in choice of courses; conversely, minors might legitimately help students to present credentials in the job market while still allowing them to pursue disinterested study of the liberal arts and sciences;
- 4 In the national languages in particular, a minor might recognize a high level of fluency and some command of literature, and thus would encourage advanced study by non-majors; a similar argument may apply in the sciences;
- 5 Minors could offer a more flexible alternative to double-majors;
- 6 Harvard has recently introduced secondary concentrations, and they seem from anecdotal evidence to be very popular among students; approximately a third of Harvard's current seniors are pursuing minors. The typical minor at Harvard requires the equivalent of 5 course credits at Yale. Princeton has a set of certificate programs, also very popular, that more closely resemble interdisciplinary minors; by far the most popular of these certificates is in finance. These certificates are offered only in fields that do not offer majors.
- 7 There may be some areas of study that are only suitable as minors and not as majors.

Arguments against Minors:

- Minors might not provide students with sufficiently intellectually rigorous exposure to a discipline to deserve special recognition by Yale College;

- Minors might encourage the seeking of credentials or “merit badges” at the expense of choosing courses for their intrinsic interest and value;
- By emphasizing credentials, minors might discourage the free-ranging approach to a liberal education traditionally encouraged at Yale; they may encourage “accreditation inflation” and a rush for all or most students to take minors;
- There is a danger that introducing minors would in fact undercut some small programs by encouraging their majors to switch to minors; they might also undercut interdisciplinary majors;
- Minors will of necessity include a large proportion of required courses, which may not be as intellectually stimulating as electives chosen more freely;
- Some of the concerns raised by proponents of minors (especially the scatter-shot nature of students’ choice of electives) might be better addressed by an improved advising system, and the Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Advising is currently studying the advising system;
- Students who wish to pursue the equivalent of a minor are free to do so, and the absence of the word minor from their transcript does not cause much harm; the existence of formal minors might cause students to take extra courses simply for the sake of official credentials;
- There already exists a wide range of requirements for majors in Yale College; it would be difficult to devise an appropriate template for minors. Some minor proposals received by the Committee required as many credits as existing majors.
- Yale’s existing system of over 75 majors already offers more curricular options than many peer institutions; our double majors offer many of the features supported by proponents of minors. At Princeton, it is not possible to double major. At Harvard “joint concentrations” are restricted to intellectually contiguous fields and require a fully joint senior project.
- Introducing minors will require additional administrative time and effort for which, as the Provost’s office has stated, additional resources are not available at this time;
- The reforms introduced by the Committee on Yale College Education (CYCE) will be reviewed beginning in the fall of 2010; consideration of adjustments to the curriculum should await that review; at the moment, it is too early to analyze the full effects of the CYCE since only one class has graduated under the new requirements it introduced.

Historical Background

Our survey of the debate over the possibility of offering minors during the past decade suggests that the current divided state of opinion reflects longstanding ambivalence about this issue among the faculty.

The 1999-2000 ad hoc Committee that recommended formation of the Committee on Majors also weighed the pros and cons of establishing minors, although this was not its primary mission. In its report to the Faculty, the Committee pointed out that “on the plus side minors can offer students a structured second experience that enhances the primacy and possibly the quality of their major...As a practical matter, a switch of numbers of students from completing the requirements of two majors to offering a minor in place of the second major would relieve advising pressure on senior projects....On the minus side, an introduction of minors at Yale would cause complexity and confusion.” The 2000 Committee report concluded, “Our committee is at best lukewarm about idea of minors.”

The next formal consideration of the establishment of something like a minor was within the 2003 report from the Committee on Yale College Education (CYCE). The main context for discussing the possibility for a secondary concentration was the need for such an interdisciplinary approach in the sciences (see page 39 of their report). “To this end, we propose that Yale establish a secondary concentration in science and quantitative reasoning....Students who completed this program would have that fact recorded on their transcript.” This recommendation was not implemented.

Our Committee surveyed departments in the fall of 2008. The full results are available in the appendix to the Committee’s interim report of 2009. In general, faculty in large majors tended to oppose the creation of minors for fear that students would seek minors in certain fields for the sake of perceived career benefits rather than for intellectual reasons. Faculty in interdisciplinary majors generally opposed the creation of minors. By contrast, there was strong support for the creation of minors among faculty in foreign language departments and in some smaller departments in all divisions. It was generally agreed that individual departments should not be required to offer minors, even if the College as a whole does offer minors.

The Yale College Council wrote a thorough, well-researched, and thoughtful report strongly supporting minors. It also surveyed undergraduates by email. Of 1704 students responding to the survey, over 85% said they would be “interested in pursuing a minor.” This finding documents interest in minors among the responders but it cannot be generalized to the student population because of potential self-selection bias. Also, the Yale Daily News wrote an editorial opposing the creation of minors.

Alternative Proposals

The Committee discussed the following alternatives to minors, which we offer to the CYCE review committee as options that might avoid some of the risks of introducing minors:

Certificate or Concentration Programs

Rather than offer a college-wide minor program, the faculty could approve a number of certificate or concentration programs, each focused on a field requiring significant technical knowledge (these might include languages, sciences, and fields such as architecture, computer science, or engineering that are closely related to particular professions). These certificate programs would resemble minors but would be offered in a limited range of departments that

have a strong rationale for such an alternative to majors. This might help avoid a “minor arms race.”

Secondary Concentrations or Extended Distributions

A quite different alternative to minors would involve extended distributional requirements, such as that envisioned by the Committee on Yale College Education (see “Historical Background” above), which would allow students, for example, to take an array of courses in a broad field other than their major (such as science and quantitative reasoning) and receive credit for the breadth of this study. Such an approach would mitigate the perceived tendency of minors towards over-specialization.

Skills-Oriented Credentials

The Committee considered the possibility of offering advanced certificates in the major skills groups (foreign language, writing, quantitative reasoning); some of the faculty responsible for administering these skill groups saw this option as too close to the “merit badge” model.

Support for Foreign Language Study Abroad

The Committee noted, not for the first time, that an effective way to encourage students to study foreign languages would be to support well-funded study abroad programs, akin to the Light Fellowship, in all languages taught at Yale, if funds could be raised for such programs.

Conclusion

At some future point, if minors or some alternative were to be offered, it would presumably be through a pilot program, with a provision for review after a given number of years. The Committee on Majors, or another body, would need to create guidelines as to what constitutes a minor. The Committee is concerned that, at present, there is a very wide range in the number and type of requirements for a major (departments require anywhere from as few as 11 courses to as many as 23; see the histogram in Appendix A). The requirements for a minor should be more uniform.

Although the Committee recognizes the validity and seriousness of calls for a system of minors, it shares the concerns of a large number of faculty members that minors might actually exacerbate some of the trends—towards pre-professionalism, chasing of credentials, and narrowness of focus—that they are intended to counteract. We therefore encourage the Yale College faculty to await a full-scale review of the changes introduced by the Committee on Yale College Education before introducing a significant change to the curriculum.

Respectfully submitted,

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Appendix A

Number of prerequisites and required courses per major

2009/10 Yale College Programs of Study

of prerequisites and required courses/major