Student-Designed Major Guidelines

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The Student-Designed Major: Is it Right for You?

Students at SMCM who find that their academic interests cross disciplinary lines may propose a Student-Designed Major (SDM). Like any major at the College, SDMs develop a student's expertise in a particular area by providing opportunities for both breadth and depth of study in that area. Unlike other majors, however, these goals are accomplished by assembling sets of courses across multiple programs offered by the College.

The learning outcomes for a Student-Designed Major must clearly map to the courses included in the major. This means that while a course or set of courses can be repurposed to serve the curricular aims of an SDM, SDMs are ultimately limited in scope by the curricular components available at the College. Students should not expect to be able to design a major at SMCM for which we do not offer the majority of curricular opportunities required for the major to be viable. For example, a student interested in nutrition could design a major that takes up nutrition by studying the biological and cultural processes that shape food choices; they could not, however, design a major narrowly focused on nutrition and food service or agricultural science, as we don't offer courses in those areas.

Students considering a Student-Designed Major should keep in mind that such majors require students to do extra: what is already determined for you in a traditional major must be created in a Student-Designed Major and formalized in a written proposal. Students designing their own majors, however, do get help: while the student is responsible for writing the SDM proposal, they do so in close consultation with the faculty members who will serve on their advisory committee should the major be approved.

All SDMs must go through a formal approval process-- culminating with an evaluation of the proposal by the Curriculum Review Committee (CRC)-- in order to be adopted. To these ends, students who are proposing an SDM also work with the Associate Dean of Curriculum, who advises students on developing a proposal, ensures that the proposal is approved by the faculty who will serve on the advisory committee, and shepherds the proposal through the approval process.

Student Eligibility

Students wishing to propose a Student-Designed Major should do so before they have earned 56 credits, whether at St. Mary's or another institution. For students who enroll at St. Mary's College as first year students, this means they will need to have their SDM approved before the end of the spring semester of their sophomore year.

Transfer students who have accumulated more than 56 credits prior to beginning their coursework at SMCM may still design their own major, but the major must be approved during their first semester at the College.

Any student proposing a Student-Designed Major should be in good academic standing. Students proposing an SDM should have at least a 2.5 cumulative GPA at the time that their proposal is submitted to the CRC for approval. Proposing and managing a Student-Designed Major requires extra time and effort from the student; students with GPAs under 2.5 should concentrate their efforts on improving their academic standing, not designing a major.

Curricular and other Requirements for Student-Designed Majors

1. General College Requirements

2. A minimum of 48 credit hours of coursework for the major, chosen from at least three areas (defined here as courses beginning with different prefixes, such as ECON or BIOL). One of these areas can be a recognized Cross Disciplinary Study Area, such as Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSX) or African and African Diaspora Studies (AADS).

    The 48 hours of coursework must include:
    a. 20 credits in a single area contributing to the major, at least 12 of which must be upper level;
    b. 12 additional upper-division credits, chosen from among the other areas contributing to the major;
    c. At least one methodology or theory course, preferably from the first designated area (i.e., from a., above);
    d. Core 302 or a similar credit-bearing professional literacy experience housed by one of the areas contributing to the major;
    e. A St. Mary's Project (SMP) (eight credits);
    f. Elective credits to complete the required 48 credits.

3. No more than eight hours of internship credit or four hours of Independent Study may be counted toward the major.

4. Students must earn a grade of C- or better in each course counted toward the major, and maintain an overall GPA of at least 2.0 in these courses.

All Student-Designed Majors are guided by a faculty advisory committee. The advisory committee consists of at least two faculty members, each from different disciplinary areas included in the major. Advisory committee members must become the students' primary and secondary academic advisors.

Getting Started: How to Develop Ideas for a Student-Designed Major

Student-Designed Majors should begin with a conversation. Any student interested in an SDM should start by discussing it with their academic advisor or a faculty member with expertise in the SDM topic or an area related to the topic. They may also contact faculty who chair/coordinate programs that will be the primary or secondary disciplines in the major.

Students who want general information about the SDM process, or who have an idea for a major but are uncertain as to which faculty might be appropriate advisors for the major, should contact the Associate Dean of Curriculum.

At any of these meetings, students should be prepared to:

>   Discuss the topic of their SDM and why they are interested in it;

>   Ask if there are other faculty whose expertise connects them to the major;

>   Refine their approach to the SDM; and

>   Begin discussing courses that will contribute to the major.

Once you have discussed your major with faculty in the disciplines that will contribute to the major, you will be ready to assemble your SDM advisory committee and write your SDM proposal.

The SDM Advisory Committee

The Student-Designed Major advisory committee consists of faculty representing the areas that contribute to the SDM. These faculty should be identified early as they will serve an integral role in the development of the major and the SDM proposal. The Associate Dean of Faculty can assist students in identifying faculty who are best suited to serve on the advisory committee.

Faculty serve on the advisory committee at the request of the student. They must confirm their commitment to serve on the advisory committee for the major-- and their approval of the final written proposal-- to the Associate Dean of Curriculum.

The SDM Proposal

Student-Designed Majors require a formal written proposal that provides a justification for the major as well as details regarding the courses that will contribute to the major.

Proposals should be clearly written for a multidisciplinary audience. Each proposal must include the following sections:

1. Learning outcomes for the major. These will be written by the faculty who have agreed to serve on the student's advisory committee.
2. A detailed description of the topic for the major. What does each disciplinary area included in the major contribute to the academic exploration of the topic? Why does this exploration require a student-designed major rather than completing a traditional major(s) and/or minor(s)? Students may include a list of three to four keywords that encapsulate the major if that's helpful.
3. An explanation of the student's interest in the topic. Specifically, how does the major contribute to future plans: career aspirations, graduate school, engagement in a complex social problem or research question, or other long-term reasons for pursuing the major? Students may want to visit the Career Development Center to discuss their student-designed major in relation to their professional goals prior to developing this part of the proposal.
4. A list of all courses that will make up the major. Courses should be grouped under separate areas. Course discipline, number, and title must be accurately indicated. Any course already completed should be noted with an asterisk; the grade received should also be included. Course list must include 8 credits of SMP coursework.
5. A description of any anticipated field work, research activities, internships, study tour or study abroad opportunities that will contribute to the major.
6. A list of possible areas, questions, or topics to be explored by the SMP. Explain how the coursework for the major will prepare the student for this project. While a student's ideas for SMP topics will develop or change over time, this discussion allows the advisory committee and the CRC to understand the student's goals more concretely.

Students should use [this template](#) for their proposals.

SDM Proposal Approval Process

Once the proposal is drafted, it will be reviewed by the Associate Dean of Curriculum, who will ensure the proposal conforms to the above guidelines and make revision suggestions as needed.

Once final changes have been made, the advisory committee will sign the proposal as indicated on the [proposal template](#) to verify their support of the proposal and their willingness to serve in this role.

Students will then submit their signed proposal through a Google form. Once submitted the proposal is shared with the Curriculum Review Committee, who will discuss and then vote on the proposal. The CRC will vote to approve or deny the major; if the proposal can be approved

provided the student makes changes to the proposal, such as adding or deleting a course from the major, the Associate Dean of Curriculum will convey this information to the student.

Students are notified of the status of their proposal by the Associate Dean or the CRC chair via email. If the major is approved, this notification is followed by a letter from the Associate Dean to the student outlining next steps and reiterating responsibilities. A copy of this letter is sent to the advisory committee and the Registrar as well. The Registrar will update the student's major on the Portal, and assign the advisory committee members to be the student's academic advisors.

If the major is not approved, the CRC will recommend next steps to the student. If the proposal is approved conditionally, the advisory committee will work with the student to make any necessary changes. Once changes are made and verified by the Associate Dean and the CRC chair, the above steps will be taken.

Managing Approved Student-Designed Majors

Upon CRC approval of the major, the advisory committee members become the student's academic advisors. One will be the primary advisor, the other secondary. Students must meet with the members of their advisory committee at least once a semester (meetings can be one-on-one or as a group). It is the student's responsibility to schedule these meetings.

Should a member of the advisory committee become unavailable (due to retirement, paid leave, etc.) the current advisory committee, together with the student, will identify appropriate replacements for the departing member if needed. The student will contact the suggested faculty member to discuss becoming a part of their Student-Designed Major advisory committee.

Students must complete the required courses for the major with a C- or better in order to graduate with the major. Any changes to the courses included in the major must go through an approval process. Changes that the advisory committee deems minor (in keeping with the original intent and justification of the coursework for the major) may be approved by the advisory committee. More significant changes must be approved by the CRC.

All Student-Designed Majors will have a Google folder established by the Associate Dean of Curriculum and shared with the student and the advisory committee. This folder will contain the approved Student-Designed Major proposal, the letter of approval from the Associate Dean, and any updated lists of approved courses.

Finally, remember that all SDMs require an SMP. The SMP mentor does not have to be a member of the SDM advisory committee. Students should, however, discuss their SMP plans with their advisory committee-- and they should do so no later than January of their junior year.

Students may register SMPs that cross disciplinary lines under IDIS 493/494; SMPs that meet outcomes for a particular major should be registered with that department (e.g., CHEM 493/494). In the latter case, it is the student's responsibility to identify any procedures that will govern how their SMP is approved by the department, and to follow those procedures in a timely manner.

All students must apply to graduate during their senior year; once the student applies to graduate, their major will be certified. The primary advisor will certify the student's major by checking transcripts against the most recent list of courses approved for the major.