

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

April 16, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Douglas Estry, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education
and Dean of Undergraduate Studies

FROM: Gary Hoppenstand, Chairperson, University Committee on Curriculum

RE: **Request to Eliminate the Award Type of 'Specialization' at the Undergraduate Level and Convert Existent Undergraduate Specializations to Minors**

Request to Change the Policy Definition of a Minor

For Transmittal to the University Committee on Undergraduate Education (UCUE)

The request referenced above is being sent to the University Committee on Undergraduate Studies (UCUS) in accordance with the *Bylaws for Academic Governance*, 4.4.

UCUE Response Requested:

Please ask the UCUE to consider the request referenced above and provide consultative commentary.

Request:

This is a request to:

- recommend the elimination of the award type of 'Specialization' at the undergraduate level and convert existent undergraduate specializations to minors.
- update the policy definition of a minor.

Rationale:

This request addresses the issue of unclear, non-translatable, curricular terminology not course or program content. The term "specialization" is unique to Michigan State University and does not translate well to external MSU constituents such as employers or graduate school admissions counselors. The term is not used by any another AAU or CIC school to describe an academic program offering that is listed on the transcript. With an increasingly international student population, and an increasing international focus, Michigan State University needs to use established and well-understood terminology to describe its academic offerings.

An October 2012 AAU survey provided the following information:

- none offer specializations at the undergraduate level
- 36 institutions responded
- 31 institutions have minors at the undergraduate level
- 4 institutions have minors at the graduate level
- average number of credits required for a minor is 17



University Curriculum and Catalog

Hannah Admin. Building
426 Auditorium Road
Room 151
East Lansing, MI 48824

517-355-8420
Fax: 517-353-1935

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- most allow some double-counting and require a unique requirement for minors
- 11 institutions have an upper-division course requirement for minors
- The percentage of minors awarded as compared to degrees awarded ranges from 17 to 50%, with the average being 33%
- 16 institutions offer tracks, concentrations, area of emphasis, certificates at the undergraduate level
- 13 institutions offer tracks, concentrations, area of emphasis, certificates at the graduate level

Specializations were developed to fulfill a curricular need during a time when minors were not offered at MSU and most majors were mono-disciplinary, hence the emphasis on an interdisciplinary program. Since minors are now offered, and since the term “minor” is a more widely used, better accepted, and better understood term for an academic program, it makes sense to convert the current undergraduate specializations to minors. Minors at MSU are both mono-disciplinary, e.g. Spanish, and interdisciplinary, e.g. History, Philosophy and Sociology Science.

The value to colleges of having the opportunity for cross-collegiate partnerships remains. There is no connection, and never has been any connection, between the administrative possibility of cross-collegiate partnerships and use of the term specialization. It is just as possible to have a cross-collegiate partnership for a minor as for a specialization. Minors already exist for which there are no majors in the same area of study for majors. The reference to interdisciplinary content is in the award’s (e.g. minor’s) title.

Having complex academic terminology is not helpful to students, faculty, or advisers. Having easily understood categories makes advising easier and facilitates an understanding of how to read the MSU transcript.

Assumptions:

- Students currently enrolled in a minor or specialization will be able to complete their minor or specialization under the current rules.
- The viability of minors and specializations is determined by the faculty who teach them.
- The department and college determine that a student has fulfilled the requirements necessary to earn the minor.

Unique (not double-counted) Credits and Blurred Distinction between a Minor and a Specialization:

Specializations were developed decades ago at Michigan State during a period when minors were not available. In Fall 2007, the first minors were created. During 2008-2009, a comprehensive set of award type changes were proposed including the decision to amend the definition of a minor to require the completion of unique (not double-counted) credits. Another item in this comprehensive proposal was to eliminate use of the term specialization and only to have minors. There was resistance to part of this proposal based on the unique credit requirement for minors and preference for the word specialization and its tradition as an offering at MSU. As an outcome, both specializations and minors are now offered.

Given the changing nature of areas of study and their inherent interdisciplinarity the distinctions between minors and specializations has become increasingly blurred. This has made double-counting a more powerful distinction than any area-of-study distinction. If there were a precise reason for unique credits in a particular field, students would understand. But, in some instances, units are choosing the specialization name solely to avoid unique credits.

The unique 12-credit requirement for minors is ineffective. It is difficult for colleges to monitor and has led to inconsistent determinations of what the unique credits are. This policy is being applied to students inequitably resulting in some credits being double-counted for some students but not for other students. For Fall 2011, Spring 2012, and summer 2012, 552 students earned a minor. 148 did NOT have 12 unique credits. Therefore, 27% were awarded without the 12 unique credits as required.

Although the definitions for minors and specializations were developed thoughtfully, the distinction between the academic content for a minor or for a specialization is not always apparent. One of the salient differences between a minor and a specialization is the fact that 12 of the credits for a minor need to be unique, that is, not counted toward any other requirement, whereas the credits for a specialization may be comprised totally of credits that may be double-counted, that is, counted toward other degree requirements. An examination of the list of current minors and current specializations demonstrates the fact that in terms of content differences between minors and specializations are not discernible.

Most specializations require 12 to 18 credits with an average of 17.85 credits. Of the current 55 specializations, 5 require less than 15 credits; and 3 require a range of less than or more than 15 credits.

Average Number of Credits Earned by Undergraduates with and without a Minor:

- Students who graduate without a minor 129.7
- Students who graduate with a minor 134.3
- All students who graduate with an undergraduate degree 130.1

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Current definitions of these two award types:

Minor - A minor is a secondary field of study at the undergraduate level. It is a coherent set of courses that provides students with an introduction to the breadth and in-depth knowledge of a field of study. Minors are supplementary to the student's major. Minors are open to students who are not in majors in the field of study represented by the minor, and may be limited to students from particular majors or colleges. The minimum number of credits for a minor is 15. At least 12 unique credits counted towards the requirements for the student's minor must not be used to fulfill the requirement for that student's major. A student wishing to declare a minor must initiate the request with the unit responsible for the administration of the minor.

Guidelines for Minors

<http://www.reg.msu.edu/Read/UCC/minorguidelines.pdf>

List of Current Minors

<https://www.reg.msu.edu/AcademicPrograms/Programs.asp?PType=MNUJ>

Specialization - An interdisciplinary program of thematically related courses. Final approval is concurrent with the degree certification process. The recommended number of credits is 12 to 18.

Guidelines for Specializations

<http://www.reg.msu.edu/Read/UCC/special.pdf>

List of Current Specializations

<https://www.reg.msu.edu/AcademicPrograms/Programs.asp?PType=SPCU>

Benefits of Adopting the Proposal:

The inconsistency of double-counting or not double-counting for comparable areas of study will be eliminated with the elimination of a required unique credit requirement.

If unique credits are required, it will be evident when and why, academically, these unique credits are required. The revised minors definition requires a clear indication if the credits for a minor will count or will not count to satisfy another university, college or major requirement.

Renaming specializations as minors will bring a higher level of understanding of the MSU credential for external constituents (potential employers, graduate school admissions counselors, international institutions, etc.) and for institutional reporting.

Student interest in minors may increase given the name recognition the term minor carries beyond the university.

Impact of the Proposal:

Students who are already enrolled in specializations will not be affected.

Currently, there are 55 undergraduate specializations that will be affected by the proposal as the name of the award would change from specialization to minor.

Any undergraduate specialization with less than 15 credits (approximately five) may continue as a minor for up to two years from the effective date of the approval of this proposed policy. Within that two-year period, the unit offering the minor will need to request the addition of credits to the minor in order to meet the minimum requirement of 15 credits. The average need is the addition of 3-credits (e.g. one course).

Departments and colleges retain the right to configure a minor and thereby determine if any of the credits must be unique, i.e. not double-counted. If unique credits are required, it must be explicitly stated in the catalog statement for the minor. This will eliminate the ambiguity that exists for advisers and students now.

Students who are already enrolled in minors will not be affected.

Proposed Definition of a Minor for Academic Programs catalog text:

***Minor** – A minor is a secondary field of study at the undergraduate level. It is a coherent set of courses that provides a student with an introduction to a field of study. Minors are supplementary to the student’s major. Minors are not open to students who are in majors in the field of study represented by the minor, and minors may be limited to students in particular majors or colleges. The minimum number of credits for a minor is 15. The Academic Programs catalog must clearly state if some of these credits for the minor are required to be "unique". "Unique" credits for a minor are defined as credits that do not count for a course taken to satisfy another university, college or major requirement.*

From Academic Programs – Academic Program Terminology

Specialization

~~An interdisciplinary program of thematically related courses. Final approval is concurrent with the degree certification process.~~

Minor

~~A secondary field of study at the undergraduate level. Final approval is concurrent with the degree certification process.~~ A minor is a secondary field of study at the undergraduate level. It is a coherent set of courses that provides a student with an introduction to a field of study. Minors are supplementary to the student’s major. Minors are not open to students who are in majors in the field of study represented by the minor, and minors may be limited to students in particular majors or colleges. The minimum number of credits for a minor is 15. The Academic Programs catalog must clearly state if some of these credits for the minor are required to be "unique". "Unique" credits for a minor are defined as credits that do not count for a course taken to satisfy another university, college or major requirement. Final approval is concurrent with the degree certification process.