

Self-Designed Major (SDM): Information and Procedures

SDM Overview

As a student at Muhlenberg, you have the opportunity to design your own major. To design a major is to create a set of courses and/or experiences that will give you the knowledge and skills appropriate for advanced inquiry or work in your chosen subject. Creating a major is a significant undertaking that requires among other things: meeting with faculty members and getting to know the college's curriculum, clarifying your interests and goals, as well as identifying, ordering, and scheduling an appropriate group of courses and experiences. While the creation of a major is a considerable commitment of time and effort, students often find the process itself to be quite rewarding.

Designing your own major is an exciting way to pursue and develop your passions, and you are free to propose a wide variety of SDMs. However, it is important for students to recognize that there are some limits to the SDMs that can be realistically pursued within the liberal arts context of Muhlenberg College (see the college's Mission Statement). These limits are a result of the simple fact that the college does not have the structure or resources to support advanced student inquiry or work in every subject or field (indeed, no college can support every potential major). This means that you will need to make sure that your proposed field or subject makes sense given existing faculty expertise and interest, college degree requirements, facilities, equipment, etc. Most successful SDMs achieve this either by developing an existing minor or by focusing on subjects that draw on courses from two or more existing majors or minors.

Developing Your Self-Designed Major: Where to Start?

Designing your own major can be daunting, so start with the basics. First, think about what constitutes a major. Typically, majors are composed of both required and elective courses, and include anywhere from 9-15 courses.

Second, think about how you will arrange your courses. Your SDM should not merely be a list of courses you would like to take but include a clearly defined curriculum with flexibility and options. What are your core courses? What are your elective options? If your proposed self-designed major is an extension to an existing minor, then the structure of the minor can be a good guide for structuring the major. If you are proposing a self-designed major from scratch make sure to take a look at the Muhlenberg College catalog to see how other majors are structured. Some majors are more flexible in terms of the number of electives permitted, while others are more stringent with required core courses.

Third, look for examples of similar majors offered at other colleges. Doing so will help you see your project within a wider context, and suggest different ways of developing your proposal.

Fourth, think about how you'll bring everything together at the end. All majors at Muhlenberg need to have a culminating experience that allows students to demonstrate and integrate the skills and knowledge gained in the completion of the major. Most often this is done through a final research paper, project, or performance.

Finally, check out some examples of approved Self-Designed Majors from recent years.

SDM Guidelines

- SDMs are prospective courses of study. A student will likely have completed some of the courses included as part of the SDM, especially if they are developing an existing minor into a major, but the *major is not to be used retroactively*.
- SDMs are distinct programs of study that cannot be satisfied by existing majors or combinations of majors.
- SDMs need to have a clear structure and include core or foundational courses and electives that build a strong and cohesive curriculum.
- All SDMs require a distinct culminating undergraduate experience (CUE) appropriate for the subject or field.
- Courses taken at other institutions may be included in the major. However, normally no more than one-half of courses in the major can be taken at other institutions (possible exceptions include courses taken while studying abroad).
- Students planning to study abroad should consult with the Office of Global Education to determine likely course offerings.
- Timing: students should begin the SDM application process no later than the Spring of their Sophomore year. In particular, the *Prospectus* and *SDM advisor agreement* should be shared with liaison no later than March 15th of Sophomore year, and the full proposal should be sent to liaison no later than Sept 30th of Junior year.
 - A student may begin the process later, however, they must petition through the Dean for Academic Life for an exception.
 - Students planning to graduate early should adjust the timeline accordingly

Putting Together an SDM Proposal: The People

In order to develop your SDM proposal you will need to work closely with two people in particular. First, and most importantly, you will need to identify an SDM advisor. The SDM advisor is a faculty member with some expertise and interest in the subject or field of the proposed major, who agrees to be your advisor for the major. The SDM advisor will help you clarify your interests and work with you to develop an appropriate course of study in light of those interests. Once the SDM is approved, the SDM advisor is responsible for tracking your progress through the major, and ultimately for certifying your completion of the major.

The second person you will need to work with is the SDM liaison. The SDM liaison is a faculty member on the Curriculum Committee who will help you understand the SDM program and guidelines, and will review your SDM proposal. When the SDM liaison thinks your proposal is ready, he/she/they will present it to the Curriculum Committee. The liaison will pass on required changes or suggestions from the Committee, and will ultimately inform you of the Committee's decision.

SDM Liaisons for AY 2023-2024:

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Putting Together an SDM Proposal: The Process

1. Conceptualize your major by exploring the options Muhlenberg College has to offer.
2. Meet with the Dean of Academic Life to talk about your idea, and to pick up information including the Prospectus Form.
3. Fill out your Prospectus Form.
4. Identify and meet with potential faculty advisors. If you are interested in expanding a minor into a major, be sure to select an advisor from within that discipline. SDMs built from minors are expected to be submitted on the same timeline and with the same intentionality as novel SDMs.
5. Once you have met with a potential advisor, and have a signed Collaboration Agreement, set up an appointment with an SDM liaison. (No later than March 15th of your Sophomore year)
6. Working closely with your faculty advisor, develop your proposal. You will want to seek guidance from other faculty members, consult the Catalog and the two-year course schedule, and if necessary, locate courses transferable from other colleges.
7. All SDM proposals will include:
 - a. The title of the proposed major, your name and class, the name of the SDM advisor, and if applicable, other major and/or minor(s).
 - b. A description of the proposed major.
 - c. A rationale or statement explaining why you are pursuing the proposed major.
 - d. A list of courses, including course descriptions, prerequisites of all courses, and GARs, to fulfill the major (including at least one writing intensive course in the proposed major.)
 - e. A brief proposal for satisfying the CUE (Culminating Undergraduate Experience requirement). If you will be working on the CUE with someone other than your SDM advisor, you will need to include a statement of support from that faculty member.
 - f. A list of courses that will fulfill the GARs (A maximum of two courses required for the major may be used to satisfy a distribution requirement.)
 - g. A four-year plan listing all semesters to show how your academic programs— proposed major, other major and/or minor(s), and GARs—will be fulfilled prior to graduation. You can use the [registration planning worksheet](#) as a template.
 - h. A copy of your current academic transcript, with courses and grades to date.
 - i. Two examples of a major from other colleges that parallel your proposed major, along with an explanation of significant divergences from these models.
 - j. A statement of support from the SDM advisor that discusses (i) the feasibility of completing the major, (ii) the academic integrity of the proposed major—is the proposed major appropriate to the field or area of study, will it give the student sufficient breadth in terms of knowledge and skill, and is it sufficient deep in that it gives the student the knowledge and skill required for advanced inquiry/work?, (iii) compares it to similar majors at other institutions, and (iv) agrees to take on the responsibilities of overseeing the major and advising the student.
 - k. Request for Self-Designed Major Form signed and dated by the student and the SDM advisor.

8. Submit a draft of the SDM proposal to the SDM liaison. The SDM liaison reviews the proposal and may suggest changes. (No later than September 30th of your Junior year).
9. The SDM liaison presents the SDM proposal to the Curriculum Committee. Be prepared to engage in a revision process to incorporate the Committee's suggestions.
10. Once the Committee grants its approval of the SDM, the student will collect signatures from the Chair of the Curriculum Committee and the Dean of Academic Life on the Request for Self-Designed Major Form.
11. Last, file your approved SDM proposal with the Registrar.

How the Curriculum Committee Evaluates SDMs

The Curriculum Committee evaluates each proposal on an individual basis. It is common as part of the evaluative process for the Committee to ask for clarification and suggest changes to proposals for subsequent resubmission. Ultimately, the Committee votes on whether to approve the proposed SDM. All proposed SDMs must satisfy the conditions outlined above. In addition, the committee needs to be convinced of all of the following:

- The major is feasible to complete in light of the student's other commitments.
- The proposed course work, experiences, and CUE are appropriate to the field or area of study.
- The proposed major gives the student sufficient breadth in terms of knowledge and skill.
- The proposed major is sufficiently deep in that it gives the student the knowledge, skills, and opportunity for relevant advanced inquiry/work.

It is important to recognize that simply because the liaison brings a proposal to the committee does not guarantee that it will eventually be approved, though most are. SDMs are complicated and it takes a whole committee to comprehensively evaluate these proposals. The SDM liaison will pass along the committee's questions, comments, requests, and suggestions to the student and will facilitate subsequent resubmission of the proposal.

Changes to an Approved SDM

The Curriculum Committee's approval of the SDM carries with it an expectation that the major will be completed as specified in the proposal. However, students sometimes need to make changes to their majors. For example, it may be that the courses that are being offered in a given semester differ from those listed in the two-year plan. In this event, you should start by consulting your advisor. If your SDM advisor judges that the proposed changes to the SDM are relatively minor (e.g. swapping courses between semesters, substituting a relevant course, etc.), then he or she merely needs to notify the registrar of the change. If, on the other hand, your SDM advisor judges that the proposed changes amount to a significant change to the major, then the changes must be approved by the Curriculum Committee. In this event, contact the SDM liaison.