

Individual Majors in the College of Arts and Sciences

The Individual Major offers Oberlin students the chance to focus their academic work on a topic outside the framework of an existing department or program. In this program, a student can define his or her own major, drawing on courses from various disciplines within the college. The Individual Major is a challenging opportunity for the student to articulate a course of study that centers on a theme important to the student and supported by the resources of the college, but not currently represented by the majors that departments offer.

The Individual Major is created in collaboration between a student and two faculty advisors, who work together to define a common theme for the major and to articulate how it fits with the goals of the liberal arts degree. With faculty advice and approval, the student defines the major, proposes the relevant coursework for it, and presents a coherent rationale that explains its focus, purpose, and viability as an Oberlin liberal arts major. The student's proposal goes before a faculty committee, which will discuss the proposed major with the student and either approve it or suggest changes. Most proposals have to be revised at least once. If approved, the major becomes a contract between the college and the student and, when completed, the title of the major is listed on the student's transcript. Some students go on to propose an Honors project in their Individual Major.

The theme of an Individual Major is by nature interdisciplinary, drawing on the coursework, methodologies, and resources of at least two departments. It is not a broad "liberal arts" major, but has a specific focus connecting the disciplines on which it draws. Area studies (such as "Sub-Saharan African Studies" or "South Asian Studies") are popular in Individual Majors, created by analogy with existing area study majors such as Latin American Studies, and drawing on courses in departments such as History, Politics, Sociology, and so forth. Some Individual Majors focus on a particular medium of expression and artistry, such as "Poetry" or "Digital Arts" or "Narrativity in Film." Other Individual Majors follow particular social issues, placing the student's individual concerns in relation to the disciplines that help to analyze those concerns: some recent majors in this area are "Community Based Education," "Liberation

Struggles Studies," "The Sociology of Women in Sport," and "Peace and Conflict Studies." A number of Individual Majors take advantage of the resources of the Conservatory of Music, drawing on the pre-professional study of music to create a liberal arts major in the college - for example, "Music Production: Creating African-American Music in the Present," "Music Education for South Asia," or "Psychomusicology."

The Individual Major has historically been a way in which the college has defined emerging disciplines. Before the creation of programs in Women's Studies and Environmental Studies, for example, students were creating their own majors in those fields, drawing on the expertise present in the college faculty and forging the ways in which those fields were to become the strong programs that they are today at Oberlin, now offering their own majors. Currently, a number of Individual Majors in multi-media studies, film studies, and cultural studies, may be pioneering similar evolutions in the structures of knowledge and disciplines at Oberlin.

The Individual Major is not for everybody. It's a challenging process to define the major and get it approved, and it takes a student willing to stay on top of the details of his or her program. But for certain students it is a wonderful opportunity to forge a personalized focus for the liberal arts major and to take a special role in how Oberlin can contribute to his or her individual education.

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