

INDIVIDUAL MAJOR HANDBOOK

If you are a student in the College of Arts and Sciences, the Individual Major (IM) offers you the chance to focus your academic work on an interdisciplinary program outside the framework of an existing department or program major. In an Individual Major, you define your own major program of study, drawing on courses from two or more disciplines within the College. In certain cases, you might apply to work toward a degree with Honors in your Individual Major.

The Major as Part of the Oberlin B.A.

Intellectual depth and breadth are the two essential poles of a liberal education. Depth is realized through intensive training in a major, whereas breadth results from the assimilation of the content, approach, and insights of several different disciplines. Oberlin's general education requirements encourage students to seek breadth in their education, while the major requirements help them to achieve depth.

In a departmental major, you would pursue depth through intensive training in a discipline represented by a department or program (e.g., Biology, History, or Creative Writing). Requirements for such majors are published in the Course Catalog and on departmental websites; it can be useful for you to study these in order to understand the depth and intensity (e.g., the level of advanced work) expected in an Oberlin College major.

The Process of the IM

The Individual Major is created in collaboration between you and two faculty advisors, who work together to define a common topic for the major and to articulate how it fits with the liberal arts goals of the Bachelor of Arts degree at Oberlin. The process usually begins in the sophomore year (and no later than the first semester of the junior year). With faculty advice, you name and define the major, propose the relevant coursework for it, and present a coherent rationale that explains its focus, purpose and viability as an Oberlin liberal arts major. Your written proposal and faculty recommendations go before the Individual Majors Committee, a faculty committee which either approves it or suggests changes. Most proposals have to be revised at least once. If approved, the major becomes a contract between you and the college, though changes may be necessary as faculty go on leave or courses are changed. These changes are made in consultation with your advisors and the IM Committee. After the proposal is completed, you may return to the IM Committee to propose an Honors project in your IM. When completed, the title of the IM is recorded on your transcript.

Some Sample IM Topics

The topic of an IM 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 “South Asian Studies”) have been 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, Art, and Religion. Some IMs focus on a medium of expression and artistry, such as “Digital Arts.” Other IMs follow social issues, placing the student's individual concerns in relation to the disciplines that help to analyze those concerns. 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 Journalism and Promotion” and “Popular Music Studies.” Below is a list of approved IMs from the past few years.

Recently Approved Individual Majors

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 2019-20 | Empowering through Music
Arts Management
The Major Romance Languages
Music Journalism and Promotion |
| 2018-19 | Popular Music Studies
Electroacoustic Physics and Design
Data Science |
| 2017-18 | Linguistics
Performing Arts Management
Education: Theory and Practice
Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies
Interdisciplinary Approaches to Communication |
| 2016-17 | Evolution of Cognition
Western Performance and Social Transformation
Sports, Culture and Communication |

The IM and the College

The Individual Major has historically been a way in which the college has defined emerging disciplines. Before the creation of programs in Environmental Studies and Cinema 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 and cultural studies may be pioneering similar evolutions in the structures of knowledge and disciplines at Oberlin.

Conservatory Individual Majors

Although many Individual Majors draw on the resources of the Conservatory, the major as described in this document is only offered within the College; that is, it is available as a way of fulfilling the major requirement only within the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree, not the Bachelor of Music (B. M.) degree. For information about the Conservatory Individual Major, consult the Conservatory Dean's Office.

Pros and Cons of the IM

The Individual Major is not for everybody: it's a challenging process to define the major, bring faculty and courses together from different disciplines to create a strong proposal and course list, to write up the proposal and see it through the consideration process to approval. Successful completion of the IM takes a student who is willing to stay on top of the details of their program, be flexible and resourceful when classes get cancelled or plans change, and above all be willing to consult advisors and other faculty on a regular basis.

Furthermore, you should be aware that in choosing to pursue an IM, you will be going a route that may be isolating: there will not be significant departmental support for the majors as there is in some regular departments; there is little crossover in interest or topic among the IMs working on campus at any given time; and the IM itself may look strange to employers or graduate schools looking at your resume or transcript.

But for certain students it is an opportunity to forge a personalized focus for the liberal arts major and to take a special role in how Oberlin can contribute to their individual education. The IM does signal—to others in the college, to the world beyond Oberlin, and to you yourself—a thoughtful and challenging approach to liberal arts education.

The Individual Major Committee

The IM is overseen by the Individual Majors Committee, which is appointed by the College Faculty. Membership in the committee, and its chair, change year-by-year, but it is normally staffed by faculty from many different areas of the college, with an interest in interdisciplinary work and knowledge of college procedures and resources.

The chair serves as the principal liaison with the committee for IM students. The name of the current chair can be found on the IM [webpage](#).

The IM Committee holds meetings approximately monthly. Proposals, changes or other information for the committee should be submitted to the chair no later than one week before the next scheduled meeting (materials received after that date will not be considered until the next meeting). Times and dates of upcoming meetings are available on the IM [webpage](#).

PROPOSING AN INDIVIDUAL MAJOR

Most IMs are planned in the sophomore year. You should begin the IM process early in the year, with the goal of completing a proposal for the IM Committee in the second semester of sophomore year. Occasionally, proposals may be considered by the committee if submitted early in the first semester of the student's junior year, but no proposals will be considered from second-semester juniors or seniors.

For the purposes of explanation, the process is divided below into three stages, planning the IM, writing the IM, and submitting the IM. In practice, of course, these will overlap. As you plan, you will be writing drafts of your proposal and getting feedback on them from your advisors and the chair of the IM Committee; as you write the proposal, you will realize that you need to consult and plan further.

Planning the IM

How to start planning an IM? One step is to read through this and related descriptions of the IM to get an overview of the way the College thinks about the major. You can also learn more by talking to an academic advisor in the Academic Advising Resource Center (Carnegie 113), contacting the current chair of the IM Committee, and/or visiting the IM [website](#).

Study the Oberlin Course Catalogue Information

Visit the [Course Catalogue](#) website to familiarize yourself with the Statement of Goals and Objectives for Oberlin College. You should also look at the College of Arts and Sciences: Major Study section. Major programs are described in several departments or programs related to your proposed IM. You should also look through the course offerings in the disciplines from which you hope to draw your IM course work.

If your proposed major relates to majors at other undergraduate colleges or universities, get to know the shape and rationale for those majors as a way of articulating the idea more clearly in the context of an Oberlin education. If possible, include links in your proposal to at least two other institutions that offer a similar major.

Draft Notes for Yourself

Think of a number of alternative titles for the IM and some phrases that indicate the nature of the interdisciplinary field you are proposing. Take notes on the departments and programs on which you might draw and the courses that you believe are central to your field. It would also be helpful to list the names of faculty members whose teaching and scholarship have some connection with your field.

Consult with Faculty and Students

The chair of the IM Committee will have experience with IMs in many fields and at many stages: it is important both to inform the chair of your plans and to consult at various stages in the creation of a proposal.

Even more centrally, it is important to find the right faculty advisors for your IM. You will need at least two advisors, in different departments, but you might start with one in the first stages of planning. For IMs that cross divisions (college and conservatory), one of the advisors will probably be from the conservatory. These advisors should be faculty members with good knowledge of the resources and workings of the college (faculty in their first year of appointment at Oberlin are not encouraged to take on advisees). They will be your academic advisors once your IM is approved and takes effect, and their help will be essential as you pursue the IM and negotiate the almost inevitable changes that it will go through. If advisors go on leave during your IM, you will need to find a replacement and inform the Academic Advising Resource Center/Registrar by completing the [Change-of-Advisor Form](#).

Other students who have gone through the IM process are an excellent resource in helping and encouraging you to sharpen and focus your work, and to suggest faculty resources.

Writing the IM Proposal

The forms for the IM proposal are available [online](#). When completing the forms, be sure to follow the instructions for each form. Keep your materials available for re-writes while the planning and consideration process goes on: most IMs are rewritten several times before being approved.

Specific Requirements for the IM

The Individual Major has a number of requirements. When evaluating these requirements, please note that two half courses equal one full course.

- A minimum cumulative GPA of 3.0 at the time of application
- At least 10, but no more than 15, full courses or the equivalent in the major
- At least eight full courses or the equivalent at or above the 200-level
- One full course serving as the Capstone Course, taken in the senior year, focusing on the specific theme of the major
- At least one course at the advanced level involving in-depth research, culminating in written work and presentation, creative work, and/or performance
- At least four full courses or the equivalent in the major not begun at the time of submission, including the Capstone Course
- No more than 2/3 of course work may be taken in any one department or program, as determined by the course prefix

- No more than five full courses or the equivalent of work in the major may count towards any other declared major, minor, or concentration
- No more than 1/3 of course work for the major may be taken off campus
- Courses in which a student has earned a letter grade lower than a C-/P cannot be counted towards the major

Key elements of the IM Proposal

The IM proposal has five major sections that you will need to complete: the Title of the IM; the Primary Rationale; the Course Grid Sheets; the discussion of Course Rationales; and the Capstone Course Description. You will also need to have your advisors complete the Advisor Recommendation forms.

The **Title of the IM** should be appropriate for entry on your official Oberlin transcript. The title needs to describe in brief the interdisciplinary field that you are proposing as an equivalent to one of the existing disciplinary majors at Oberlin. Avoid proposing titles of the form “X and Y” (for example, “English and History”), which indicate a double major rather than an interdisciplinary one (one recent IM, for example, was titled “The Sociology of Women in Sport,” naming a more precise relationship between the key disciplines than the vague linkage of “Sociology and Athletics”). Be sure that you are prepared to define and explain key words in your title: an IM titled “Community Based Education,” for example, needs to go on to explain the particular nature of “community” that is implied in the title.

In addition to the title, please include the following information:

- your OCMR number, phone number, and Oberlin email address
- your current class year
- your expected date of graduation
- any other major(s), minor(s) or concentrations you are pursuing

Please note that once the IM Committee has approved your IM proposal, the committee reserves the right to share it with other interested students.

The **Primary Rationale** expands on and explains the title, defining the academic field of the proposed major. This should be a carefully written essay, up to three pages long (not exceeding 750 words), indicating the focus, direction, and purpose of the major, as well as its viability and suitability as an undergraduate field of concentration. The IM Committee will expect the primary rationale to do the following:

- Explain the topic that you propose to major in. Explain what disciplines it draws upon (departments and programs, usually) and how they will interact to create an interdisciplinary area of study. If appropriate, describe parallels to this area of study as majors at other colleges or universities, or in other IMs at Oberlin. If possible, provide links to similar majors at other institutions.

- Show how the proposed IM will fulfill the goals of a liberal arts major at Oberlin, primarily that of depth, “realized through intensive training in a major.” You might also include methodology courses that will enable you to complete the proposed IM.
- Articulate the viability of the IM, showing that the resources for completing it, such as faculty and coursework, are available at Oberlin or through an off-campus study program. (However, please note the limits on off-campus course work listed in the Specific Requirements for the IM).
- Address the ways in which your proposed IM is distinct from existing majors at Oberlin in related fields, and why those majors would not fulfill the goals you propose for your IM.
- Speak to why this area of study is important to you, how it fulfills your own goals for a liberal arts education, and what it may lead to after graduation.

The courses that constitute the major are a crucial part of the proposal, and should be submitted in the form of a set of **Course Grid Sheets**. These grids constitute a contract for the IM that the Registrar will expect you to adhere to. Any changes that you make to the major after the proposal has been approved will need to be accepted by the IM Chair and/or the Registrar. (For more details, see “Changes to the IM” below).

To help the IM Committee understand the course list, the column called “TYPE” should include codes as follows (more than one code may be used for any given course, if applicable):

- INT for introductory courses below the 200-level
- MED for intermediate courses at the 200-level or above, excluding Advanced courses and the Capstone Course
- ADV for advanced courses involving in-depth research, culminating in written work and presentation; creative work; and/or performance
- CAP for the Capstone Course
- ALT for an alternative to a course listed in the grid (list an ALT course immediately after the primary course it may substitute for)

In some cases, EXCO courses are relevant to the IM, and may be listed in the course grid sheets. Since EXCO courses are not listed in the Course Catalog, you should include further information about the EXCO course in the Course Rationale, namely, the title, description, instructor’s name and credentials, and rationale about the appropriateness to the proposed IM.

The proposal must include a **Course Rationale** section in which you explain the relevance of the courses in the Course Grid Sheets to the major. This rationale should categorize the courses as appropriate: that is, rather than following the chronological listing of the grid sheets, you should list courses by theme. In many cases, that involves discussing the courses by department, listing, for example, all the English courses, from introductory through advanced, and explaining the

function of each in the major. In other cases, it may be helpful to use your own thematic categories to organize this list. (An IM dealing with issues of education, for example, might use a category of courses directly referencing education even though Oberlin has currently no education department or program.) The course rationale normally gives only a few lines to each course, and should not reproduce the course catalog description in most cases.

The **Capstone Course** will form the culminating element of the IM in the senior year. Its focus is the specific theme of the major. It should provide an integrated overview of the different components of the major and the interdisciplinary field defined by the major.

In most cases, the Capstone Course will be a Private Reading, but a seminar or other advanced course may in some cases serve this purpose, especially if you and the instructor agree that your work for that seminar could be directed towards the field of the IM.

You should discuss the Capstone Course with the instructor and agree on a description of the material to be covered in the course. If the instructor for the Capstone Course is not one of your IM advisors, ask the instructor to send an email approval of the Capstone Course Description to the chair of the IM Committee.

You should review the written IM proposal with both faculty advisors and obtain their approval before submitting it to the IM committee. Furthermore, you should make sure that both advisors complete the **Recommendation of Advisor** form, which they should send electronically to the chair of the IM Committee.

Submitting the IM Proposal

Submit all IM materials to the chair of the IM Committee as email attachments. Your advisors will need to electronically sign your application. You can send the application to the first advisor for their signature and then, when its returned to you, pass it along to the second advisor for their signature. You should also make sure that the two advisors have forwarded their recommendations to the chair of the IM Committee, as the proposal cannot be considered without them.

You will be notified by the chair of the IM Committee soon after the meeting. If the proposal is not accepted, the chair will outline problems and concerns as identified by the committee, and will send the advisors copies of this letter. You should be aware that few proposals are accepted as first submitted. In most cases, the committee hopes that if your proposal is not accepted, you will meet your advisors, consider the feedback of the committee, and revise the proposal for resubmission.

IMPLEMENTING THE INDIVIDUAL MAJOR

Once your proposal is approved, you need to fill out the standard Declaration of Major Form (available from the Academic Advising Resource Center/Registrar) and submit it to the chair of the IM Committee for a signature as “Department Chair” and to each of your faculty advisors for signatures as “Advisors.” Both advisors will then be considered by the college as your academic advisors and will receive RAP numbers, grade reports, and other advising materials about you.

The approved proposals, as well as this Declaration of Major form, will be kept by the Registrar. The IM becomes, therefore, a contract by which the Registrar will certify the successful completion of the IM when the course work has been completed.

Minor Changes

The IM Committee recognizes that some changes in the course work proposed may be necessary as you implement the major. Faculty may go on leave, courses may not be offered as planned, or the very nature of the major may need to be revised. It cannot be stressed too strongly that such changes must be approved in advance.

Minor changes are construed as additions of courses, substitution or deletion of a course; or change in the semester in which a course is to be taken. As long as such changes do not affect the general plan of the IM, minor changes are to be discussed between you and your advisors. If your advisors approve, they sign a Minor Course Change Form and you submit it to the chair of the IM Committee to be considered and forwarded to the Registrar. The Minor Change Course Form should include a revised grid sheet for the semester(s) in which the change(s) will occur.

Extensive Changes

Extensive changes are those affecting the title, rationale, Capstone Course, or changes in a number of courses. If you are proposing extensive changes, consult with your advisors and submit a description of and rationale for proposed changes to the chair of the IM Committee. Your advisors must email their approval to the chair. If you have any doubt about whether a proposed change qualifies as extensive, consult with the IM Committee chair.

Honors in the IM

Honors in the IM may be proposed after the IM proposal has been approved, during the junior year, providing the deadline noted below is met. There are certain requirements that must be met for proposing Honors in your IM:

- A minimum average of B+ (3.33 GPA) in courses that count towards the IM

- Completed Honors Proposal outlining the Honors Project to be undertaken over a period of two semesters (generally in the senior year), in one full course each semester. The research and final product must be directed by at least one of the advisors for the major. The proposal is to be submitted to the chair of the IM Committee by the deadline for the April meeting during the junior year, or by the deadline for the November meeting if the Honors work is to begin in the spring semester.
- A completed Honors Proposal of five to seven pages that includes a 250-word abstract, a full description of the project and the resources to be used in working on the project, the nature and scope of the final product (thesis, creative work or performance), bibliography as appropriate, and recommendations from both advisors.

If approved, the advisors will assemble a committee to evaluate the Honors work, made up of themselves and at least two additional faculty members from fields related to the work of the project.

The determination of recommended level of Honors should be made by the Honors committee on the basis of a comprehensive exam (oral or written) to be administered by the advisors, the quality of the project itself, and the student GPA in the major (following college guidelines). The advisors will inform the IM Committee chair of the grades earned in the two semester Honors courses and the recommended level of Honors (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors). (If Honors is not granted, Honors courses will convert to private reading courses). The chair will seek approval of the recommendation from the IM Committee, and inform the College Honors committee of the final recommended level. Please also note that, at the time of application for Honors, a student may petition to have the Honors courses replace the Capstone course for the IM. The application for Honors should be supported by recommendations from both advisors for the major.

THE INDIVIDUAL MAJOR: STUDENT TIPS AND TIMETABLE

Here are some tips that may help you prepare for and successfully complete your IM:

- Plan early: don't put off planning and submitting an IM proposal because you're not totally sure of what you're doing. Almost everybody changes their original proposal somewhat. Get started in your sophomore year.
- Choose advisors carefully. If possible, find advisors who are familiar with the IM process—i.e., people who have been on the committee, or have advised other IM students. If that won't work, learn about the IM yourself and make sure your advisors have the same materials and knowledge. Also, find an advisor you like and with whom you work well. Ask them for specific advice on the strengths and weaknesses of proposal drafts and address any concerns before submitting your proposal. You may also need to remind your advisors to turn in recommendations when they are due.

- Please note that the entire process, from beginning through committee approval, may take many weeks, if not months. Developing a specific calendar of deadlines is an important first step.

Planning and Proposing Stage:

- Make sure that you shape your ideas for an IM and consult with the IM Committee chair. Find advisors and work with them to give the proposal initial shape—title, rationale, course list, Capstone Course.
- Draft your proposal and discuss the draft with both advisors. After revising your proposal in light of the feedback you receive from your advisors, discuss the revised draft with the chair of the IM Committee.
- Prepare a final version of the proposal, get advisors' approval, and submit it to the IM Committee chair. This is normally done by the end of the second semester of sophomore year, and definitely no later than early in the first semester of the junior year. IM proposals must be approved prior to the end of the first semester of the junior year). The committee will consider only complete proposals, including advisor recommendations, submitted to the chair at least one week before the meeting.
- The IM Committee discusses the proposal, approves it or suggests changes. It is likely that you will have to revise and resubmit your proposal before it is approved.

Implementation Stage:

- Once approved, you can start implementing your IM. As you complete your IM coursework, maintain regular contact with your advisors, especially at registration times. You may also need to propose minor or extensive course changes, and you may wish to propose on Honors program in your IM.
- At registration for the first semester of senior year, you should meet with your advisors to review progress, consider changes, and discuss the Capstone Course.
- Near the end of your senior year, the Registrar will check your transcript against the IM proposal and will certify completion of the IM. The title of your Individual Major is recorded on your official transcript. Congratulations!