

Subcommittee on Majors and Minors: Final Report

What, we asked, is the measure of a successful major? We agreed that it was not a matter of sheer numbers of students. Success in admission of students to excellent graduate programs was, we thought, certainly one index.

That discussion led to one about the identification of majors, the maintaining of data bases of current students and graduates, and conducting of online surveys of students—both current and alumni—to learn from them what they consider to be/have been the successes of their majors and the areas in need of improvement. We talked of the creation by the students in the English Majors' Counseling Office of a survey that was conducted through e-mail with all current English majors. Susan Kessler-Sklar, from the Office of Institutional Research, helped with the mechanics of the survey (putting the questions into electronic form, identifying English majors, sending the survey to them), which had a 45% response rate. We agreed that it was important to share information about the mechanics of creating and conducting such research with all departments. Nehru Cherukupalli volunteered that Geology also maintains a database of students and hosts periodic reunions of alumni.

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo mentioned the sharing of resources by, and institutional support of, the six “programs” (Women's Studies, American Studies, Religious Studies, Children's Studies, Environmental Studies, etc.). To survive, these programs, interdisciplinary in nature and not “owned” by departments, need, at a minimum, reassigned time for administrators. There is a need for the development of “learning communities” on the campus—communities in which, for example, knowledge about how to counsel or survey students, etc., is shared. Such communities would compensate for the lack of material resources at the College. They are the “soul” of the institution.

Gertrud Lenzer suggested that we should do research (online university Web sites would be the place to begin) to discover programs of distinction at other campuses on which to model our own majors and minors. We should develop, based on our findings, a list of criteria for programs of distinction.

A place to begin the possible revamping of our majors is to revisit our course offerings in the Brooklyn College Bulletin, to decide if the courses currently listed should remain active (and, if so, in what ways they should be revised), in time for the reprinting of the Bulletin in March, 2006.

Departments should undertake an un-mandated five-year review of programs, which would reduce the trauma of the mandated ten-year self-study and external review required of all departments.

We considered two new possibilities for majors on the campus: “major by design,” which would mean the creation by a student, with good advisement, of a group of courses in allied fields that would prepare her for either graduate work in an interdisciplinary field or a job requiring multiple knowledges; the creation of truly interdisciplinary majors (e.g., biochemistry, biophysics), the result of collaboration of two or more existing departments. We may offer two or three models of such major/minor “construction.”

We talked about encouraging more faculty to take active roles in the counseling of students in their choices of majors, minors, and interdisciplinary programs (we did not specify the mechanics of delivery of such advisement but should consider this question the next time we meet. Question: should members of departments be part of a cadre of advisers adjunct to the Dean's Office and available to counsel students who have yet to choose their majors?)

In connection with the enhancement of advisement, we discussed the importance of assessing faculty interests, supporting faculty development (faculty need to understand new trends in their fields but also to know how to help students link their academic knowledge up with career opportunities). Reassigned time (release from some classroom instruction) is necessary if there is to be a serious academic advisement initiative begun at the College.

We discussed the multiple advantages of good internships for students, which are almost universally acknowledged as the one thing needful in beginning a career. Ellen Tremper mentioned that the student interns in the English Majors' Counseling office are gaining skills (desktop publishing, counseling, blog creation, etc.) at the same time that they are helping their peers to construct reasonable schedules that fulfill requirements for the major and

graduation. (We expressed concern that students not be exploited in their internships and offered ways of checking on their progress to confirm that their experiences are academically rich).

We agree that the good condition of the physical plant is conducive to academic excellence in major and minor programs. There is a need for better spaces in which to conduct classes, which means: working lights, better acoustics and ventilation (industrial carpeting to tamp down noise, quieter and more air conditioners); an increase in the number of “smart” classrooms; wireless Internet access in classrooms. We recommended noise baffles or mufflers on the cafeteria vents in Boylan that make the rooms on the second floor of the long corridor in that building a difficult environment in which to teach and learn. We also recommend that central air be installed with dropped ceilings to hide the pipes. We are mindful of the expense of refurbishment and would be pleased with a schedule of renovation for the spaces of each department and program, comparable to the office-painting schedule now in place.

To our discussion of May 16th, we added these points:

*We recommend a university-wide reconfiguration of workload such that the teaching of summer-session courses be included in the workload computation for members of the faculty. This accommodation would allow a block of time, particularly useful in the experimental sciences, for setting up labs and getting started with research projects during the academic year. The teaching of courses during the summer would, of course, be voluntary. We recognize that this recommendation requires a change in the PSC-CUNY contract—one that we would encourage the union to add to its bargaining demands.

*We recommend the renumbering of courses in all departments to conform to the usual system in most colleges in which levels of difficulty would be clear from the first digit of each course number: 100s, 200s, 300s, and 400s. (Essentially, we already use the 3-digit, tiered numbering system for graduate courses with our 600 and 700 series.) Adopting this digital nomenclature would help students interested in transferring to Brooklyn and, once admitted, finding the appropriate equivalents for courses they had already taken at their other schools.

*We recommend the formalization of an internship program for each major, which would be used to create a bridge for interested students between the major in college and post-graduation employment.

*We also recommend that recent hires, who are newly-minted Ph. Ds, be formally included in the advisement programs of their departments to aid students who are interested in applying to programs of graduate study.

*We recommend an interactive Web program be devised to help students chart out major and minor programs of study. Specifically, students need a rich up-to-date description of courses, rather than telegraphic summaries like those necessitated by the expense of paper publishing, and good descriptions of faculty members’ interests and accomplishments to provide a strong basis for choosing majors, minors and individual courses. The program would work something like a beta tree; the student would plug in a course, which would produce a cascade of choices of other courses based on the first selection, and so on. To this end, we suggest a closer collaboration than now exists between departments (or programs) and AIT.

*We would like to see more uniformity of Web sites across departments and programs—if not in design, then in the content of information provided on them. Students would be less confused as they accessed the Web to learn about different majors or even merely individual electives.

*We thought there should be an explanation on the Web of the complementarity of different majors and minors. For example, a journalism major interested in local reporting could find out about a political science minor that could strengthen her knowledge of city government and services.

*The integration of co-curricular activities (like undergraduate research conferences in departments and programs), the strengthening of internship programs and more innovative relationships between the Magner Center and individual department programs would further the objective of creating a seamless transition between the student’s major and job placement.

To sum up, we think there are a number of low-budget ways to increase students’ knowledge of the different options open to them in the construction of their course of study, mainly through better use of Web sites and a more rational

course-numbering system. The individual or group counseling we are suggesting will probably be best accomplished by “remunerating,” through reassigned time, those faculty members who participate.

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Anthony Stevens-Arroyo
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(These were the faculty members present at our May 26th meeting.)