

Portland State University Faculty Senate Motion
6 March 2023

Allowing interdisciplinary majors to use “extra” courses from their major towards their Upper Division Cluster

Motion presented by the Academic Requirements Committee

Students majoring in Arts & Letters, Social Science, Science, and Urban & Public Affairs will be allowed to use courses that are applicable to those majors to fulfill their Upper Division cluster instead of the major requirements. The relevant text in the Bulletin will be changed as follows (text to be added is underlined):

Students might choose a cluster to broaden their perspective, allowing them the opportunity to take classes of interest outside their major, or students can choose a cluster to complement their major area of study. In either event, Upper-Division Cluster courses may not be used to fulfill a student’s major requirement. In addition, students cannot take cluster courses in their major or courses cross-listed with their majors except for those in the following majors: Arts & Letters, Social Sciences, Sciences, and Urban & Public Affairs. The Upper Division Cluster theme completed is recognized as a note on the student transcript.

Background, rationale, and preliminary discussions

The PSU Bulletin states the following about the Upper Division Cluster:

Students might choose a cluster to broaden their perspective, allowing them the opportunity to take classes of interest outside their major, or students can choose a cluster to complement their major area of study. In either event, Upper-Division Cluster courses may not be used to fulfill a student’s major requirement. In addition, students cannot take cluster courses in their major or courses cross listed with their majors.

This proposal will allow students majoring in Arts & Letters, Social Science, Science, and Urban & Public Affairs to use courses that are applicable to those majors to fulfill their Upper Division cluster instead of the major requirements.

Reason for the proposal:

Unlike majors that are from within a single department (e.g., English), courses that are applicable to these four majors are taught by multiple departments (e.g., all arts and letters disciplines), and are “owned/managed” by the Colleges and not single departments. For students from those majors, their choice of cluster courses is limited because they are not allowed to choose courses from the wide variety of departments in those majors, which can cause confusion, particularly if the course is cross-listed. They often inadvertently choose cluster courses that are applicable to the major, and, therefore, not allowed towards their cluster.

Students choose these majors either because they intentionally wish to study the intersections of departments (for example taking courses in political science,

community development, economics and child, youth and family studies to prepare for a career in family law) or because they have met a barrier in completing their major requirements, and changing to one of these majors allows them to finish their degree. In either case, the current policy requires them to take courses outside of those broad disciplines. This frequently results in having to take extra cluster courses. As a consequence, graduation may be delayed, they may choose to leave PSU entirely, or additional expenditure for tuition may incur.

As an example, a student majoring in Social Science cannot use *any* course from *any* social science department towards their cluster. If they would like to choose Families and Society as a way to “complement their major area of study” and prepare for a career in social work or education, only about one-third of the classes in that cluster would be allowed. A Psychology major, on the other hand, would only be restricted from choosing three PSY courses in that cluster

Justification:

Students who pursue one of the listed majors are, by definition, already “broadening their perspective” outside of a single discipline, and in this sense, allowing them to use cluster courses from their interdisciplinary areas is in alignment with the mission of Upper Division Cluster. While there is certainly benefit to students taking courses in an even broader array of subjects, we do not currently require students from single discipline majors to choose cluster courses from a different academic distribution area than that which represents their major. Biology majors can choose the science-heavy Global Environmental Change or Science in Social Context; English majors could complete the Examining Popular Culture cluster with courses that are within the arts and letters distribution.

The proposed change, if approved at the Faculty Senate, will be applied only to the following majors.

CLAS-Arts and Letters
 CLAS-Social Sciences
 CLAS-Sciences
 CUPA-Urban & Public Affairs

This proposal has the support of the Degree Requirements office, Advising & Career Services Leadership team, the University Studies Council, and the Budget Committee. If approved, we would work with the Office of the Registrar and University Studies to change the language in the PSU Bulletin as well in DARS effective Fall 2023.

Attachments:

UNST Council memo
 Budget Committee memo

To: Faculty Senate Steering & ARC

From: The FS Budget Committee

RE: Endorsement of the Proposal to allow interdisciplinary majors to use “extra” courses from their Major Towards their Upper Division Cluster

The faculty senate budget committee met with the chair, Suwako Watanabe and other members of the Faculty Senate Academic Requirements Committee on Oct 3, 2022 to review their proposal to allow for interdisciplinary majors to use “extra” courses from their major towards their Upper Division Cluster. We discussed the financial impacts both to students and to the University. After a lengthy discussion on the number of students this may impact, the complexity of the petition processes in place, and the best efforts of advisors to steer students towards the best avenues for degree completion, it is felt this change will be financially beneficial to the campus overall.

The Faculty Senate Budget committee endorses the plan and language change laid out by the Faculty Senate Academic Requirements Committee to provide an easier pathway for students to reach degree completion through the use of “extra” course credits for interdisciplinary majors in these areas: CLAS-Arts & Letters, CLAS-Social Sciences, CLAS-Sciences, and CUPA-Urban & Public Affairs.

To: Academic Requirements Committee (ARC)

From: University Studies Council (UNST Council)

December 16, 2022

Re: Proposal to allow students declaring interdisciplinary majors to use courses from their major to fulfill the junior cluster course requirement

The University Studies Council met on December 5th and unanimously approved the ARC proposal to allow students declaring interdisciplinary majors to use courses from their majors to fulfill the 12 hours of junior cluster courses requirement, a part of the University Studies core curriculum.

This approval addresses the following interdisciplinary degrees: CLAS-Arts and Letters, CLAS-Social Sciences, CLAS-Sciences, and CUPA-Urban & Public Affairs. This exemption, taking junior cluster courses in the students' majors, addresses a significant problem whereby students unintentionally take more courses than they need in order to graduate. The limited junior cluster courses interdisciplinary students encounter leads to excessive petitions, which is inequitable due to the fact that the students may not even know that they can file petitions.

The main concern of the UNST Council is a question of equity in regards to whether students in the major disciplines are constrained by the parameters of the junior cluster requirement, while students in the interdisciplinary degrees are unconstrained by them. However, the Council agrees that this exemption promotes college success and supports retention efforts at the higher division level of undergraduate education at Portland State University.

The UNST Council recognizes that the review of this proposal has been delayed due to the pandemic. The UNST Council thanks Suwako Watanabe for submitting the proposal again and taking time to attend the Council meeting on December 5th to answer questions and address the concerns of the University Studies Council.

KWSC/12-14-22