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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1969 a new major program was begun at the State University of New York at Buffalo in which students were allowed to design their own majors if they elected to do so. All majors were to be approved by 2 faculty members and a Special Major Committee. The question arose as to how graduate and professional schools would react to this major program when considering a student for admission. It was found through a survey of the 58 graduate departments and professional schools at SUNY-Buffalo that the student who designs his own program will be accepted to a graduate department or professional school provided he can initially compete with others on standardized measurements (grade average, letters of recommendation, standardized exams), and he documents his worth and that of his endeavor to the admissions personnel. Most graduate departments and professional schools are only beginning to perceive the differences between student-designed programs and university-designed ones. Thus, they are somewhat hesitant, the sciences slightly more so, to embrace these new, less conventional programs. (HS)

Claudine Schweber Koren

STUDENT-DESIGNED CURRICULA: THE GRADUAT AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL REACTION

In recent years many universities have developed more flexible undergraduate programs. Although the programs vary with the institution, all basically allow undergraduate students varying degrees of freedom to design their own curricula.[1]

At The State University of New York at Buffalo, the Special Major program enables a student to design his/her own major, when the course of study which the student wishes to pursue does not exist among the regular university departmental offerings. The program requires two faculty members to serve as sponsors and to guide the student in the design and implementation of the project.[2] Approval is granted by the Dean through his Special Major Committee.[3]

Since the spring of 1969-70, 136 such majors have been approved. Indeed, participation is dramatically increasing. For the year 1970-71, 45 majors were approved; in the fall 1971-72, 30; for the spring 1971-72, 40.[4] While there is a definite interest in Urban Affairs and Ecology, programs vary with student-faculty interests: Communications and the Arts, Brazilian Studies, Public Administration, Drug Counseling, etc.

For many students, the process of designing and implementing their major has enabled them to focus on post

baccalaureate goals. Often this means graduate or professional school work.

Unfortunately, we had no data on how the graduate departments and professional schools would respond to an applicant whose undergraduate program was self-designed. As an advisor to undergraduate students, I felt uncomfortable with the intuitive advice I was giving these students regarding their graduate applications. I needed to know if such students would be admitted to ~~a~~ graduate/professional school and under what conditions: is there an overall pattern? If so, to what extent do the Humanities, Social Sciences, Science (graduate school) units, and the professional schools reflect this? Or are there marked differences for any unit which students should be made aware of? What kinds of information, beyond the standard application, must the students supply the graduate/professional school with?

The Study

In October 1971 a questionnaire was sent to the admissions directors of the 58 graduate departments and professional schools* at the State University of New York at Buffalo. One department was in the process of restructuring and no longer grants a degree, 4 did not respond. Consequently, a total of 53 (91%) completed

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* Post-baccalaureate work only; some graduate departments here require advanced degrees.

the questionnaire: 8 Humanities, 19 Social Sciences, 18 Science and Math, 8 Professional Schools.**

The questionnaire was divided into three parts: (1) general admissions criteria to ascertain what all applicants need; (2) reaction toward Special Major Applicants and their individualized programs--to isolate these candidates from all others; (3) course content and evaluation--to investigate how a student would be effected if his program contained non-traditional courses (e.g. independent study), and was graded in a non-traditional manner (e.g. pass/fail or written evaluation rather than the standard A-F scale). Although the aforementioned opinions are available to all students, they seem to be more frequently used by those designing special programs.

The following data is presented knowing that limited as we were by funds and staff, the study was confined to the State University of New York at Buffalo campus. However, as this is a major state university center, the results should be generalizeable, at the very least, to similar units.

A. Graduate and Professional School Concerns

The unique feature of the special major in particular, and student-designed curricula in general, is the individualized

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** Their division corresponds to this university's organization. The professional schools have their own Deans and, are more autonomous. They are the Schools of Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Library Science, Engineering, Management, Social Policy and Community Service, Architecture and Environmental Design.

program content. It is this characteristic which distinguishes such students from each other and from students with standard programs.

The graduate departments and professional schools overwhelmingly (96%) considered the content of undergraduates' programs important in assessing candidates for admission. This general consideration was reflected across all areas although the Sciences considered it more vital than the others (see Table 1).

Table #1: TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE CONTENT OF STUDENTS' UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS CONSIDERED?

Opinion	Total (53)		Humanities (8)		Social Sciences (19)		Science & Math (18)		Professional Schools (8)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
very much	23	43	3	37.5	4	21	15	83	1	12.5
some	28	53	5	62.5	15	79	3	17	5	62.5
not at all	2	4							2	25

Surprisingly 4% (2 respondents) indicated they did not consider content at all. Closer analysis reveals it was the Schools of Law and Library Science that felt this way. Indeed,

a general liberal arts education is seen as quite adequate preparation for these fields. This attitude is no doubt reinforced by the absence of undergraduate courses in either Library Science or Law.*

Respondents were also asked to indicate the kind of content they prefer. A specialized program (e.g. Media Studies, Drug Counseling) ranked highest (26%); a general one (e.g. General Studies, General Science) ranked next (11%); disapproval of both (4%). Thus while overwhelmingly believing content is important, there are as yet no strong preferences for a type.

However, it is worthwhile to note the emergence of a distinction between general/specialized student-designed programs and standard (university-designed) curricula. When asked about evaluating student-designed curricula, 43% would handle a general program like any standard one (i.e. no distinction made), but only 26% would similarly handle a specialized program (see Table 2). Apparently they feel more comfortable with distinguishing a specialized program from a standard one, although the figures hardly indicate an overwhelming recognition of the differences.

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*. A change which is developing on this campus is the emergence of many law-related courses at the undergraduate level.

Table #2: REACTIONS TO PROGRAM CONTENT (OVERALL)

Opinion	General (%)	Specialized (%)
favor	11	26
disfavor	4	4
treat like a standard program	43	26

This pattern is reflected in a breakdown by areas. The specialized program is consistently preferred (see Table 3).

Table #3: REACTIONS TO PROGRAM CONTENT (BY AREAS)

Opinion	Humanities (8)		Social Sciences (19)		Science & Math (18)		Professional Schools (8)	
	gen. %	spec. %	gen. %	spec. %	gen. %	spec. %	gen. %	spec. %
favor	-	25	10	21	6	22	37.5	50
disfavor	-	12.5	5	5	6	-	-	-
treat as standard program	37	12.5	63	47	33	17	25	12.5

Student-designed programs, with their many variations, are still a relatively new phenomena to many graduate departments and professional schools.

A sufficient number of respondents (35%) articulated reservations and raised questions about such programs that discussion here seemed appropriate. These revealed a concern for handling the complications inserted into admissions analyses by special program students. The problems fit into two areas: (1) participants in non-standard programs are difficult to evaluate as no criteria exist, "while the more conventional criteria demonstrably work, even though they do not accommodate some students who would no doubt perform superbly"; (2) the quantity and quality of applications is such that unless a candidate can compete with others on standard criterias (average, recommendations, standarized scores), admissions committees do not have the time to probe further. A very small number worried that the program may be composed of "easy" courses, or be too broad and disconnected.

The hesitations articulated above by 35% were undoubtedly shared by many more. These must have contributed to the unexpected finding that an overwhelming number (77%) of graduate departments and professional schools are influenced by the reputation of the undergraduate school when evaluating special program applicants. This represents almost four times as many as the number of respondents who make no distinction (19%)

between the affect of the undergraduate school of standard or special program students (see Table 4).

Table #4: AFFECT OF THE REPUTATION OF THE UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL ON THE REACTION TO A SPECIAL (STUDENT-DESIGNED) PROGRAM

Affect	%
considerably	40
somewhat	37
not at all	4
as much as in the case of an applicant with a standard program	19

Presumably, as an increasing number of institutions offer such programs and greater numbers of demonstrably qualified students avail themselves of the option, the difficulties should be worked out and prejudices abate.

B. Applicant Responsibilities

The uniqueness of the product and the personal involvement inherent to student-designed curricula engenders an individual responsibility (usually, institutional) for the educational

program. This means the applicant must first defend this undertaking as academically sound by successfully competing with others on general standards, and then take the initiative in communicating the particulars of the program.

At present, respondents strongly (80%) indicated that the independence and creativity a student shows in designing such a program, while admired, will not substitute for competancy in three general areas: overall average, letters of recommendation, standardized exams.

But these traditional indices are really not appropriate for measuring the same qualities in special and in standard program students. One respondent described the frustration indicated by many: "What is needed is a pattern for these (special) students, for whom the documentation, while different, is as convincing as that provided by the more conventional patterns." Such documentation exists within the program. The Special Majors of the State University of New York at Buffalo contain a rationale, a detailed course listing, letters from two sponsors. It is <u>crucial</u> that the applicant supply admissions committees with this information. As the following discussion will show, they are eager to receive it.

The conventional criteria noted above are used as indicators of future proficiency, whether an applicant has a background and motivation sufficient to successfully complete his studies, and has the capability to make contributions to the chosen field.

In special programs, motivation can be evaluated if the reason a student chose to design one is known. Admissions personnel were certainly interested. When questioned, 72% definitely wanted to know why, 11% were willing (total, 83%); only 17% were not interested. A breakdown by area reveals the Sciences a bit less interested in this information (see Table 5).

Table #5: WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN WHY THE STUDENT WROTE A SPECIAL (MAJOR) PROGRAM?

Opinion	Total		Humanities (8)		Social Sciences (19)		Science & Math (18)		Professional Schools (8)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
yes	38	72	6	75	16	84	9	50	7	87.5
perhaps	6	11	2	25	-	-	4	22	-	-
no	9	17	-	-	3	16	5	28	1	12.5
yes + perhaps	44	83	8	100	16	84	13	72	7	87.5

Secondly, proficiency and background can be ascertained by examining the individual program. Respondents overwhelmingly (94%) wanted to see this document (see Table 6). Once again, the Sciences are slightly less enthusiastic than the rest.

Table #6: WOULD YOU LIKE A COPY OF THE PROGRAM? (OVERALL AND BY AREA)

Opinion	Total		Humanities (8)		Social Sciences (19)		Science & Math (18)		Professional Schools (8)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
yes	38	72	7	87.5	15	79	10	56	6	75
perhaps	12	22	1	12.5	3	16	6	33	2	25
no	3	6	-	-	1	5	2	11	-	-
yes + perhaps	50	94	8	100	18	95	16	89	8	100

In comparing tables 5 and 6, one shift is evident. While 17% were absolutely not interested in why a student wrote the program (see Table 5), only 6% are so definitely negative about seeing the program itself (Table 6). The 11% difference seems to have migrated to the cautious "perhaps" category, which went from 11% (Table 5) to 22% (Table 6). However, any attempt to attribute this to activity in one area alone is not supported by the data. The importance here is that it points out more strongly what admissions personnel indicated earlier: the difficulty they perceive in evaluating these special programs means they are eager for supplementary information. But the applicant must take the initiative, as admissions personnel do not.

Perhaps the confidence that evaluations can be made if one has a copy of the program accounts for the unexpectedly high tolerance for non-traditional courses, like independent study. 75% responded they would count independent study as any standard course; however, 60% of these want additional information before determining what weight--positive or negative--to assign such a course. A breakdown by area revealed the same pattern exists within each unit. Once again, the responsibility is the individual's. Only 2% (1 respondent) would not count courses at all (Science & Math); 6% (3) considered independent study "easy" courses, and assigned a negative value (one each from Social Sciences, Science & Math, Professional Schools); 9% (5) considered it "specialized" work and gave it positive weight (2 Humanities, 3 Social Sciences). These figures show that no one unit can be type-cast as having a particular approach to such non-traditional course work as independent study.

This tolerance for non-conventional courses extended to non-conventional grading mechanisms. Only 19% would not count a course graded pass/fail; 7% would not consider one with a written evaluation.

Finally, the student, his program and his potential can be evaluated by appraisals from the program sponsors. 91% responded in favor of receiving such documentation (as distinguished from the usual letters of recommendation). The pattern is repeated across the areas, although, once again

the Science & Math unit is a bit more hesitant (see Table 7).

Table #7: WOULD YOU LIKE LETTERS FROM SPONSORS COMMENTING ON THE PROGRAM AND THE STUDENT (SEPARATE FROM ANY LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION)?

Opinion	Total		Humanities (8)		Social Sciences (19)		Science & Math (18)		Professional Schools (8)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
yes	40	76	7	87.5	15	79	12	67	6	75
perhaps	8	15	1	12.5	3	16	3	16+	1	12.5
no	5	9	-	-	1	5	3	16+	1	12.5
yes + perhaps	48	91	8	100	18	95	15	83	7	87.5

This is probably because they feel advanced work in the scientific fields depends on a very firm base of (undergraduate) preparation in a "broad but clearly specific range of subjects". As one admissions committee chairman in this area wrote, "our department has no wish to exclude people from graduate work, but our program is so structured and requires such a level of background that we do the students no favor to admit him unless we are reasonably sure he can be successful in his work.

This is generally the goal of all admissions personnel questioned. In seeking students who can succeed in their

chosen fields, respondents varied mostly in determining how much and what kind of preparation is appropriate.

To date standard criteria had been sufficient for selecting such students. However, the emergence of special degree programs render the standard measurements inadequate, but leave the admissions personnel without a replacement. In addition, the newness and uniqueness of such programs often means that admissions committees would not know what to ask for. This study has suggested that a rationale, a copy of the program and sponsors' evaluations would provide the documentation for assessing the potential of special program applicants. Overwhelmingly the graduate departments and professional schools were receptive. But the responsibility for transmitting such information remains with the applicant; most admissions committees still formally request only transcripts, standarized exam scores, letters of recommendation. Individual, rather than institutional, responsibility for a program continues beyond the undergraduate level.

Summary

The student who designs his own program will get into a graduate department or professional school provided he can initially compete with others on standarized measurements (average, letters of recommendation, standarized exams), and he documents his worth and that of his endeavor to the

admissions personnel (with a rationale, a copy of the program, appraisals by project sponsors).

Most graduate departments and professional schools are only beginning to perceive the differences between student-designed programs (be they general or specialized) and standard (university-designed) ones. Thus, they are somewhat hesitant, the Sciences slightly more so, to embrace these new, less conventional programs. The burden of proof lies with the applicant.

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