

# Proposed Changes to Major Declaration Policy

## Overview and Context

During the summer of 2014, a working group met at the request of Dean Karl Scholz to consider revising the Major Declaration Policy for the College of Letters and Sciences. Specifically, the group was tasked to create a plan ensuring all L&S undergraduate students declare a major by an appropriate time in their undergraduate career.

The working group included Michael Pflieger, Elaine Klein, Jo Ann Meier, Gery Essenmacher, John Hawks, Daniel Kapust, Nancy Westphal-Johnson, and Kimbrin Cornelius. The group met three times to discuss the need for such a policy, consider what one might look like, and how it might be implemented.

## Current Policy

The current L&S Major Declaration Policy states:

“Students must declare a major through the department administering that program. The effective date of major declaration determines the major requirements to be completed. Students should request a Major/Certificate Declaration form from the academic department/unit administering the major. This form should be completed by the student and left at the department office administering the major. If a student decides to change his/her major later, the student should return to that department office and cancel his/her major. Students may have as many majors as they wish, but they must complete the Major/Certificate Declaration form for each major and cancel any major they feel they cannot complete.”

## Proposed changes

The attached document includes the new proposed policy. The essence of the change is to *require* L&S undergraduate students to declare a major before they have completed 86 credits. If students have not yet declared when they complete 86 credits, registration hold will be placed on these students' records. A student may not register until they have declared a major or until the student has been granted an exception.

## Rationale for Change

Declaration of a major is a fundamental part of a student's progression in their academic career, and integral to timely graduation. Declaring a major benefits students in a number of ways, including:

- Students who declare early are more likely to complete their degree within four years.

- Declared students are connected to important pedagogical benefits, such as participation in a department's culture and membership in a cohort of students, and are connected to resources such as advising, faculty connections, and course access;
- Declaration helps departments identify students who intend to complete one of their majors, and assists with outreach to those students;
- The process of declaring 'locks in' students to current requirements, and ensures they have the right to complete under those requirements.

Despite these critical benefits, and the clear connections to timely graduation, L&S policy allows students to take courses indefinitely without declaring a major. Identifying undeclared students with a significant number of credits could represent a clear and critical advisor intervention point. Advisors help guide undeclared students through important and sometimes difficult decisions that must be made to continue degree progress. For example, what majors meet the student's interests and talents? What should the student do if she/he isn't able to meet his/her preferred program's entrance requirements? What are other resources on campus that can help? Placing a hold that delays registration is a significant intervention, and it is intended to help students who may have stumbled on the path to timely completion of their academic program.

This policy change will also help the college align communication about the importance of major declaration, so messaging is intentional and consistent from arrival to graduation. This required change will promote critical interventions by advisors who will guide students toward majors that suit their talents and interests. By implementing this policy, we are also ensuring the best use of student's resources, as well as University resources, by encouraging students to develop a plan for continuing their studies.

### **Considerations regarding time of the hold intervention**

86 credits was identified as a suitable/optimal threshold because it marks the minimum credit level for "senior standing." In addition, when looking at student declaration data, the majority of L&S students have identified majors by this point. We hope this is a point where targeted intervention makes good sense, and we are not needlessly interfering with students who cannot yet declare their major because they are still working on their entrance requirements.

Students enter L&S with a widely varying number of credits completed; they may enter with retro, transfer, text, and/or AP credit. All types of credits are included in the limit. Inevitably, some students will encounter this policy much sooner in their residence than others. Nevertheless, because 86 credits represents such significant progress towards a degree, the policy will apply to all L&S undergraduate students. As with other policies, students with special circumstances may speak to an advisor or dean for an exception.

Some students declare majors late in their academic careers because they hope to gain admission to restrictive programs either inside or outside L&S (for example, the Business School). We intend such students to be advised effectively by an advisor rather than delay making alternative plans.

## Implementation

The Dean will charge an implementation committee that will develop an overall implementation plan. Once the plan is fully developed, L&S Student Academic Affairs will be responsible for coordinating all aspects of it.

The implementation plan should adhere to several principles:

- Close coordination with other campus units to support positive action for students (Registrar's Office, Cross-College Advising, L&S departments, SOAR, etc).
- Coordinated, college-wide communication about major declaration throughout the life-cycle of the student experience. The messaging may be different for targeted groups (freshman are encouraged to explore, for example, but are also given information on how to declare).
- Online resources to help students understand how to declare, and how to get assistance with choosing a major.
- Multiple modes of messaging to ensure students receive fair warning
- A clear identification of who may remove holds, documentation of the process to do so quickly, and training to advisors, staff, and faculty who may encounter students with this registration hold.
- Understanding the declaration process for all L&S programs, and identifying best practices to ensure students will not encounter 'bureaucratic' or processing delays between the time students indicate what they will declare, and when they may register.
- Document exception policies, and provide guidance to advisors and faculty about what is a reasonable exception.