

**Preamble**

The Faculty of Arts & Science has on the books almost 400 undergraduate programs of study (POSTs), around 300 of which are Major and Specialist POSTs (~170 Specialists, ~130 Majors, and ~100 Minors). We have prided ourselves on the breadth of choice that we offer to students, yet many concerns have been raised during the process of Faculty-wide Curriculum Renewal about whether such a dizzying array of programs best serves our students. In response, part of the rationale for establishing the POST Advisory Committee was to provide a body to periodically review the set of POST offerings across the Faculty and make recommendations regarding its range and organization. In examining and (re)approving curriculum in recent years, that committee has focused primarily on the internal rationale of each program as it came forward rather than on the overall set of the Faculty's offerings. The time has come to review this full set for coherence and clarity.

Since the individual academic units are clearly in the best position to understand the structure and demands of their disciplines, the process must begin with each unit reviewing its own set of programs as they prepare them for re-approval as part of Curriculum Renewal. The guidelines presented here are intended to help units ask a set of appropriate questions in such a review: Is this the best arrangement of the subject matter for undergraduate students? Can an undergraduate understand the set of programs and make meaningful choices among them? How could we better help students understand the reasons for this arrangement? Is this set of programs sustainable? Has each of these offerings proved attractive and meaningful to enough students to justify its separate existence? Once units have reviewed their offerings, the POST Advisory Committee will be reviewing each unit's set of programs as part of the current program re-approval process, with an eye to the overall appropriateness and viability of the suite of programs across the Faculty. (For programs that have already been re-approved, the committee will contact the sponsoring units to discuss a timeframe for the review of their set of offerings.) If we respond well to this challenge, we can both remain true to the nature of our disciplines and present our students with a manageable set of meaningful choices.

**The Burdens of Extensive Choice**

As noted above, there are ~170 Specialist programs, ~130 Majors, and ~100 Minors across the Faculty.<sup>1</sup> (See Table 1 at the end of the document.) A number of concerns have been expressed during the last three years of Curriculum Renewal about whether this presents an excess of choice. In particular, the following issues have been identified:

**Student confusion.** Students may be confused by the array of choice provided by such a large set of POSTs. While Specialists, Majors, and Minors differ from each other clearly in quantity of study and usually in depth, students may find it very difficult to distinguish

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<sup>1</sup> To put this in some perspective, if every one of our 60-odd program-sponsoring units offered a suite of one Specialist, one Major, and one Minor program, the result would be about 1/3 the number of Specialists, 1/2 the number of Majors, and 2/3 the number of Minors.

among a suite of programs at the same level (e.g., a set of Major programs) offered by a single academic unit. Finer distinctions that are relevant to research areas in the field and/or the graduate level of studies may be opaque or incomprehensible to undergraduate students – especially those in first year, who must make a program selection less than a year into their university career. This concern is borne out in the number of POSTs that are cancelled, and new POSTs adopted, soon after the POST selection process: 35-45% of POSTs selected in the spring/summer at the end of first year are cancelled in the very next Fall term, with a similar number of new POSTs added. Of these changes, fewer than 20% are simply a change in level (Specialist, Major, Minor) within the same POST designator – that is, the vast majority are changes in the actual subject area of the POST.

**Advising burden.** The degree of program choice – especially among some narrowly defined concentrations – creates a burden on college registrarial and departmental advising staff. Advising staff must help students to understand and choose among this vast array of program options, some of them only minutely differentiated from a student’s perspective. This advising process occurs not only in first year, but also later as students explore the possibility of a change in programs once they better understand the choices they have made, as the large number of POST changes above suggests.

**Burden on academic units.** The above two considerations show that what faculty may perceive as a resource-free benefit to students – that is, having low- or no-enrolment programs on the books in case someone comes along who wants them – actually creates a burden of choice for students and a resource burden on advising staff. Moreover, maintaining a number of specifically-focused programs also creates a burden on the academic units themselves. While different packaging of existing courses into different POSTs may seem cost-free on the surface, there are hidden, and not-so-hidden, resource implications:

- Units often offer highly specialized courses at the 300- or 400-level as part of the narrow focus of a POST. Mounting such courses every year or on a tight rotation may necessitate having courses with low enrolments and/or hiring replacement instructors when the faculty in that area are on leave. If such courses were instead options in a more general program, these pressures would be alleviated.
- Multiple programs may require more time on the part of faculty and staff to advise students and to check POST requirements on POSAs.
- As external and internal accountability requirements are increasing, multiple POSTs may impose a burden on faculty and staff in the program justification and review process.

The above concerns make clear that while our breadth of coverage of areas of study is a strength of the Faculty, we must ensure that the choice of POST offerings is appropriate to our undergraduate mission, and in line with a strategic deployment of resources.

#### **Guidelines for program sponsors on reviewing POST offerings**

In the context of the above concerns, these guidelines will help units to review their curricula. Several factors play a role in decisions about the appropriateness and viability

of a set of POSTs: academic rationale, student demand, and unit-level support. We discuss each of these in turn below.

In a research-intensive university, the **academic rationale** for an undergraduate program must take into account the current state of the field of study. As knowledge creators and not simply knowledge disseminators, we go beyond communication of an accepted body of knowledge in our undergraduate offerings, and reflect the dynamic nature of a field of study and the important issues within it that are the focus of our research and scholarship. An academic rationale should also connect the field of study to the overall goals of undergraduate education, by indicating the individual and societal impact of training that is not necessarily connected to a graduate program or research purpose.

Within this context then, academic units should consider carefully what distinctions among areas of study make sense at the undergraduate level. While the rationale for many of our Specialist POSTs is “preparation for graduate study in the field,” it may not be necessary or even desirable for undergraduate programs to mirror the distinctions of areas of study available at the graduate level. The distinctions between the academic rationales (and expected learning outcomes) among a set of programs must be clear to our undergraduate students: given our large student body and distributed advising system, each program-sponsoring unit must clearly describe each program’s goals and potential impact in a manner that first year students (and advisors) can understand sufficiently to support their academic decision-making.

**Student demand** refers to the number of students enrolled in an existing POST or the expected demand for a proposed POST. It would be overly simplistic to set a POST enrolment threshold below which a POST should automatically be discontinued. However, the number of students in an existing POST should be considered carefully when a unit reviews the way it presents its set of program offerings, given the observation above that a POST is generally not “cost-free”.

In the current mix of programs across the Faculty, around 45% of the Specialist POSTs (74 programs) have 10 or fewer students, and 20% (33 programs) have two or fewer students. (See Table 1 at the end of the document.) Given that Specialist programs have significant 400-level requirements and are most likely to have highly specialized upper-year courses, low-enrolment Specialist POSTs should be carefully reviewed. Major and Minor POSTs overall have more robust enrolments, with around 15-20% having 10 or fewer students, but they too should be considered with respect to student demand. Having a large number of programs that fewer than 1/10 of 1% of our student body find relevant and appealing not only projects a false sense of the range of realistic choice, but, as noted above, it simply means that students have to wade through more distractions as they try to identify and focus their interests.

Finally, in determining an appropriate suite of undergraduate programs for a unit, **the level of support available** for the programs must be considered: how many and what type of programs can consistently be offered well? It has already been mentioned that highly-specialized courses in support of a narrowly defined POST can have resource

implications, particularly if the number of faculty who can teach such courses is insufficient to maintain frequent offerings, or if enrolment in the POST is low enough that some courses offered are unsustainably small. These considerations regarding the availability of teaching resources for a program may be an issue even for POSTs that have (or would be expected to have) a higher enrolment. It may be simply unfair to students and burdensome to units to offer a program where students will inevitably struggle to find courses or have to be satisfied with substitutions to complete it.

In short, academic rationale and student demand are not sufficient reasons to mount a program if the teaching capacity is not available at the current time. If there is strong academic rationale and demand for a program in such a situation, this is an issue that must be addressed with longer-term resource planning. Similarly, a unit must ensure that other resource issues are addressed – for example, the labs that are required to support a high-quality learning experience in the specific area, the availability of TAs with appropriate backgrounds, or the means for acquiring specific teaching materials. Moreover, the unit should consider the advising support needed for helping students to understand and choose among the unit's suite of POST offerings, and should acknowledge that since the advising function is distributed across departments and colleges, they need to have clear justifications for and descriptions of programs to support this dimension of offering a POST.

#### **Further considerations in structuring a set of POST offerings**

Even given the above factors, multiple ways to structure a set of POST offerings may present themselves to a unit. One facet is the arrangement of programs at different levels – i.e., Specialist, Major, and Minor. Although each of these serves a different educational goal, it is not necessary to have a Specialist, Major, and Minor in each area of study simply for the sake of logical completeness. Arguments about academic rationale, student demand, and unit-level support apply separately to each.

The other facet in determining a unit's suite of programs is whether to offer multiple POSTs at a given level (Specialist, Major, or Minor) that subdivide the field or provide different perspectives within an area of study, or to offer a single POST that has streams or options within it. Taking the latter approach of using streams within a POST has some advantages that should be considered. It can help to present the array of program choices in a less confusing way, by grouping together related fields of study and making clear what the relations (and distinctions) among them are. This approach is especially advantageous if a program can be structured such that its different streams have a common second-year curriculum – this can enable students to select a more general area of study at the end of first year, and delay the decision of a more specific focus within that area until they have had additional study in the field. If two or more potential programs have significant overlap in courses, differing in less than half their FCE requirements, the sponsoring unit should consider such an approach. This would also ease the practical task of program reviews, and of re-approvals when the program is updated over time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, program sponsors may be considering a very general program within which students can largely choose their own path by selecting courses from a large set of options. Such a program design – that is, “broad with no streams” – may also not be ideal. While this approach reduces the number of POST offerings, it too can be confusing to students, who generally look for more guidance in their course choices within a program so that their course selections result in a coherent learning experience. While explicit streams with assessed requirements (as discussed in the paragraph above) may not always be desirable, other approaches for communicating to students the coherent sets of courses in an area should be considered. Sponsors of such broad programs should consider at least grouping courses informally into meaningful clusters that indicate the structure of the field and the positioning of course material within it, and the program description should communicate to students what comprises a coherent body of knowledge in the field.

**Final words**

Given the Faculty’s textured richness in what we offer our undergraduate students to study, the genuine breadth and depth of our offerings, there is little danger that we will appear diminished in some way if we look over our full array of POSTs, prune and rearrange them so as to present our students with a comprehensible array of meaningful choices we can support with the advising and teaching resources at hand. If we do this well, our prospective and current students will have a clearer sense of what we are about and how they can fit into it.

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**Table 1:** The top row shows the total number of POSTs in the Faculty, and the number at each level. The remaining rows show the number of POSTs (total, and of each type) with enrolments of 0, 2 or fewer, 5 or fewer, and 10 or fewer. (These numbers are cumulative –i.e., the number of POSTs with enrolment 10 or fewer includes those that have 5 or fewer, etc.)

	<b>Total</b>	<b>SPE</b>	<b>MAJ</b>	<b>MIN</b>
<b>Number of active POSTs:</b>	398	169	129	100
<b>Number of POSTs with the following enrolments:</b>				
<b>empty</b>	12	9	2	1
<b>≤ 2</b>	46	33	7	6
<b>≤ 5</b>	75	48	14	13
<b>≤ 10</b>	115	74	21	20

