

Perspectives

NEWSLETTER

Nothing Minor About It

When Pedro Arellano transferred to the UW from Green River Community College, he planned to major in mathematics. Yet he also craved opportunities for dialogue on social issues. His first quarter at the UW, he signed up for a course on Latinos in the U.S., followed by a course on Comparative American Ethnic Literature. “From there, my curiosity kept growing,” recalls Arellano.

Arellano, now a senior, is majoring in mathematics as planned, but he has added a diversity minor, reflecting his dual interests. “I love mathematics, but it does not provide the stimulation that classes in the diversity minor provide,” says Arellano. “I’ve learned about power, privilege, and racial and gender diversity. The minor has been a great part of not only enhancing my education, but also my well-being.”

The UW has offered academic minors for about two decades, providing an opportunity for students to explore a subject in greater depth without requiring the commitment of a second major. Many Arts and Science departments have the option of a minor; those whose courses routinely fill to capacity with majors cannot. (For a minor to be offered, there must be reasonable access to courses.) Most minors require a minimum of 25 to 30 credits—five or six courses—within a department.

The College also offers interdisciplinary minors, providing specialization in fields that span several departments or colleges. For Arellano’s **diversity minor**, he could choose from courses in American ethnic studies, American Indian studies, history, communication, and nearly two dozen other departments. Other interdisciplinary minors offered by the College include **disability studies**, **human rights**, **labor studies**, **values in society**, and **education, learning, and society** (ELS), the latter offered jointly with the College of Education. An **Arctic studies minor**, offered jointly with the College of the Environment, is pending final approval from the Faculty Council on Academic Standards. If approved, its anticipated launch is Winter 2014. (For descriptions of all interdisciplinary A&S minors, [click here](#).)

“These minors fill a demand that people feel hasn’t been met,” says Kevin Mihata, associate dean for educational programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. “They allow students to get substantive specialization in an area that they couldn’t get otherwise. It can help them focus their interests and articulate them better.”



UW senior Pedro Arellano discusses his diversity minor with Arts and Sciences adviser Jamie Barnhorst. Photo by Isaiah Brookshire.

That's been the case for Riley Taitingfong, a senior majoring in communication with a minor in disability studies. After taking one course in disability studies, Taitingfong was eager for more. "I had personal connections and work experience related to disability, which made the discourse interesting to engage with," she says. "I found my own assumptions and frameworks being challenged." Taitingfong also welcomed the diverse approaches that an interdisciplinary minor provides. "I probably would never have taken a policy course if it wasn't offered through this minor," she admits. "I have learned from activists and researchers, and I have made connections with people in the community that have turned into mentors. They have guided my academic choices and even gotten me involved with nonprofit work."

The Path to Approval

Because interdisciplinary minors are not department-based, planning and administration can be challenging. "It requires building connections between departments—in some cases, between colleges—and building a group of faculty who are willing to own and carry the minor," says Mihata. "It's definitely more complicated than a minor within a department."

Each interdisciplinary minor has had a unique path to approval. The diversity minor, approved in 2006, can be traced all the way back to mid-1990s, when an attempt to pass a diversity requirement for all UW students failed for the third time. (That requirement was finally passed in 2013 and will be implemented in Autumn 2014.) Conversations about the importance of integrating diversity into the curriculum led to the Curriculum Transformation Project, through which existing courses were revised and new courses developed with an emphasis on diversity. Soon a critical mass of diversity-related offerings were available, making the minor a viable option. Along with ELS, the diversity minor is now among the most popular minors, with an average of 200 students enrolled.



A Task Force course on Arctic policy (including a snowy trip to Canada, above), led Nadine Fabbi and Vincent Gallucci to consider creating an Arctic studies minor spanning two colleges.

The Arctic studies minor had a different genesis. When the Jackson School of International Studies (JSIS) became a member of University of the Arctic in 2008, Nadine Fabbi, associate director of JSIS's Canadian Studies Center, first explored the possibility of a minor. "The field of Arctic studies was starting to explode and there was a growing need for expertise," Fabbi recalls. But it was a JSIS Task Force course on the Arctic, which she co-led with Vincent Gallucci, professor of aquatic and fishery sciences and now chair of Canadian Studies, that moved planning into high gear. The pair recognized that by collaborating across colleges, they could develop a minor with breadth and depth, covering everything from

geopolitics to the environment. A steering committee moved the initiative forward; if approved, the minor will be offered jointly by JSIS and the College of the Environment's School of Oceanography.

The Good, the Great, and the Resume Padder

Mihata sees value in offering minors, but cautions against their overuse. There are students, he says, that add minors to pad their resumes rather than add depth to their education. "Some students approach minors in a very credentialist way," says Mihata. "They are looking for something to lengthen their resume and check off requirements. Nobody feels good about that being the motive." But at their best, adds Mihata, minors "allow students to be part of a committed community they couldn't find otherwise. For some, it is a big part of their

overall experience.”

Christine Ito, a senior majoring in early childhood and family studies in the College of Education, is completing two minors, for different reasons. She chose the ELS minor for professional reasons, to broaden the scope of her education studies beyond early childhood education. Then she added a diversity minor out of personal interest.

“The service learning component of the ELS minor led me to volunteer as a classroom assistant, teach a Freshman Interest Group, be involved with the UW Pipeline’s Alternative Spring Break, and mentor for the Dream Project,” says Ito. “These opportunities have given me field experience and insight into my future profession as an educator. The diversity minor has allowed me to think ‘outside the box’ and see the world through different perspectives, stories, and identities. I have taken courses in disability studies, gender studies, American Indian studies, Asian American studies, and American ethnic studies. These classes have transformed my education at the UW.”



Riley Taitingfong and Christine Ito (top row, far left and second from left) pose with a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) that they co-taught. Ito says that the ELS minor led her to teach a FIG and explore other leadership opportunities.

For students considering a minor, Riley Taitingfong has this to offer: “The most rewarding moments in my academic experience at the UW have been when I am studying the topics I care about. My minor has given me the chance to engage with material I care about and earn academic credit while doing it. If you find a minor that you are interested in, and it is manageable with your courseload, I think it is a valuable use of your time.”

Interested in what minors like human rights or values in society entail? Check out our summary of [interdisciplinary minors in the College of Arts and Sciences](#) for more information.

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