

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

May 30, 2013

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Deans, Directors, and Chairpersons

FROM: Linda O. Stanford, Associate Provost for Academic Services

RE: Elimination of the Award Type of 'Specialization' at the Undergraduate Level and Conversion of Existent Undergraduate Specializations to Minors

Revision of the Definition of a Minor

Procedures for Conversion of Existent Undergraduate Specializations to Minors

On May 15, 2013, Acting Provost Youatt approved two academic policy changes.

### ***Effective Fall 2013***

- The award type of 'Specialization' at the undergraduate level will be discontinued and all existent undergraduate specializations must be converted to minors by Fall 2015.
- The definition of a minor is revised to read:

*A minor is a secondary field of study at the undergraduate level. It is a coherent set of courses that provides a student with an introduction to a field of study. Minors are supplementary to the student's major. Minors are not open to students who are in majors in a field of study with the same name represented by the minor, and minors may be limited to students in particular majors or colleges. The minimum number of credits for a minor is 15. The Academic Programs catalog must clearly state if some of these credits for the minor are required to be "unique." "Unique" credits for a minor are defined as credits that do not count for a course taken to satisfy another university, college, or major requirement.*



## OFFICE OF THE PROVOST

Michigan State University  
Hannah Administration Building  
426 Auditorium Road, Room 430  
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

Phone: 517-355-6550  
Fax: 517-355-9601  
provost.msu.edu

### **ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE ACTIONS:**

During the past academic year, the University Committee on Curriculum undertook an extensive review of minors, specializations, and certificates in response to questions students, faculty, and advisers often raised. The UCC's work culminated in the development of a recommendation to the University Committee on Undergraduate Education (UCUE) for consultation on elimination of the award type of 'specialization' at the undergraduate level, conversion of existent undergraduate specializations to minors, and revision of the policy definition of a minor. The UCUE, in its consultative capacity to the Provost, had no concerns regarding these requests. It recommended approval at its April 25, 2013 meeting.

**ASSUMPTIONS:**

**Three assumptions fortified these policy changes.**

- Students currently enrolled in a minor or specialization will be able to complete their minor or specialization under the current rules.
- The viability of minors and specializations is determined by the faculty who teach them.
- Per usual practice, the department and college determine that a student has fulfilled the requirements necessary to earn a minor or specialization.

**RATIONALE:**

**Unclear, Non-Translatable, Curricular Terminology**

This request addresses the issue of unclear, non-translatable, curricular terminology, not course or program content. The term “specialization” is unique to Michigan State University and does not translate well to external MSU constituents such as employers or graduate school admissions counselors. The term is not used by any another AAU or CIC school to describe an academic program offering that is listed on the transcript. With an increasingly international student population, and an increasing international focus, Michigan State University needs to use established and well-understood terminology to describe its academic offerings.

**Relationship of Minors and Specializations**

Specializations were developed to fulfill a curricular need during a time when minors were not offered at MSU for undergraduates and most majors were mono-disciplinary, hence the emphasis for specializations was interdisciplinary. Minors have been offered since 2007. The term “minor” is a more widely used, better accepted, and better understood term than the term specialization. Therefore, it makes sense to convert the current undergraduate specializations to minors. Current minors at MSU are both mono-disciplinary, e.g. Spanish, and interdisciplinary, e.g. History, Philosophy and Sociology of Science.

**Cross-College Partnerships**

The value to colleges of having the opportunity for cross-collegiate partnerships remains strong. There is no connection, and never has been any connection, between the administrative possibility of cross-collegiate partnerships and use of the term specialization. It is just as possible to have a cross-collegiate partnership for a minor as there was for a specialization. Minors already exist for which there are no majors in the same field of study with the same name. The reference to interdisciplinary content is in the award’s (e.g. minor’s) title.

**Problem of the Use of Complex Academic Terminology**

Having complex academic terminology is not helpful to students, faculty, or advisers. Having easily understood categories makes advising easier and facilitates an understanding of how to read the MSU transcript.

**Unique (not double-counted) Credits and Blurred Distinction between a Minor and a Specialization:**

During 2008-2009, the year after minors were established at MSU, a comprehensive set of award type changes was proposed to academic governance including the decision to amend the definition of a minor to require the completion of unique (not double-counted) credits. Another item in this comprehensive proposal was to eliminate use of the term specialization and only to have minors; there was resistance to part of this proposal based on the unique credit requirement for minors. As an outcome, both specializations and minors continued to be offered.

Given the changing nature of areas of study and their inherent interdisciplinarity, the distinctions between minors and specializations has become increasingly blurred. This has made double-counting a more powerful distinction than any area-of-study distinction. If there were a precise reason for unique credits in a particular field, students would understand. But, in some instances, units were choosing the specialization name solely to avoid unique credits.

The unique 12-credit requirement for minors had become ineffective. It was difficult for colleges to monitor and had led to inconsistent determinations of what the unique credits are. The policy for minors was applied to students inequitably resulting in some credits being double-counted for some students but not for other students. For Fall 2011, Spring 2012, and Summer 2012, 552 students earned a minor. Of those, 148 did NOT have 12 unique credits. Therefore, 27% were awarded without the 12 unique credits as required.

Although the definitions for minors and specializations were developed thoughtfully, the distinction between the academic content for a minor or for a specialization was not always apparent. One of the salient differences between a minor and a specialization was the fact that 12 of the credits for a minor need to be unique, that is, not counted toward any other requirement, whereas the credits for a specialization could be comprised totally of credits that may be double-counted, that is, counted toward other degree requirements. Most specializations require 12 to 18 credits.

**Benefits of the Approval of These Policy Changes:**

The inconsistency of double-counting or not double-counting for comparable areas of study will be eliminated with the removal of a required unique credit requirement.

If unique credits are required, it will be evident when and why, academically, these unique credits are required. The revised definition for a minor requires a precise indication if the credits for a minor will count or will not count to satisfy another university, college, or major requirement.

Renaming specializations as minors will bring a higher level of understanding of the MSU credential for external constituents (potential employers, graduate school admissions counselors, international institutions, etc.) and for institutional reporting.

Student interest in minors may increase given the name recognition the term minor carries beyond the university.

**Impact of the Proposal:**

Undergraduate.

This proposal only concerns undergraduate specializations.

Students.

Students who are already enrolled in specializations will not be affected.

Students who are already enrolled in minors will not be affected.

Departments and Colleges.

Currently, there are 54 undergraduate specializations that will require submission of an academic program change request to convert each specialization to a minor.

The requirements for any specialization, including those with fewer than 15 credits, may continue as a specialization through Summer 2015.

The requirements for any existent minor will continue through Summer 2015.

By Fall 2015, the unit offering the specialization will need to request via academic governance the addition of credits in order to meet the minimum requirement of 15 credits for a minor. The average needed is the addition of 3 credits (e.g. one course). Some specializations list a range of credit requirements (e.g. 12-18). In these instances, the addition of a course may not even be needed as long as the minimum number of required credits is listed as at least 15.

Departments and colleges retain the right to configure a minor and thereby determine if any of the credits must be unique, i.e. not double-counted. If unique credits are required, it must be explicitly stated in the catalog statement for the minor. This will eliminate the ambiguity that exists for advisers and students now.

Effective Fall 2015, Academic Program catalog statements for current minors will be administratively updated by University Curriculum and Catalog to reflect the elimination of the unique credit requirement.

**DEFINITION OF A MINOR FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS CATALOG TEXT:**

**Minor** – A minor is a secondary field of study at the undergraduate level. It is a coherent set of courses that provides a student with an introduction to a field of study. Minors are supplementary to the student's major. Minors are not open to students who are in majors in a field of study with the same name represented by the minor, and minors may be limited to students in particular majors or colleges. The minimum number of credits for a minor is 15. The Academic Programs catalog must clearly state if some of these credits for the minor are required to be "unique." "Unique" credits for a minor are defined as credits that do not count for a course taken to satisfy another university, college, or major requirement.

### **Procedures for Conversion of Existent Undergraduate Specializations to Minors**

The effective date for the conversion of the award and any needed requirement changes will be Fall 2015. This will allow time for academic governance review.

During Fall 2013 and Spring 2014, units will need to submit to University Curriculum and Catalog, via the [RO Online Forms Menu](#), a program change request to convert their existent specialization(s) to minors.

1. To change the award from 'specialization' to 'minor,' in the online form, question 4, select 'Type of Program.' The selection of 'specialization' should be changed to 'minor.'
2. Review the current requirements for the program to make sure the minimum credit requirement is at least 15 credits.
3. Request any needed requirement changes, including indication of any 'unique' credit requirement, i.e. not double-counting. A unique credit requirement must be explicitly stated in the catalog statement for the minor.

### **Students Currently Enrolled in Minors**

Students currently enrolled in a minor will continue to follow the requirements for the minor that were in effect for the term they were admitted to the minor.

### **Students Admitted to an Existent Minor Through Summer 2015**

Students admitted to an existent minor through Summer 2015 will follow the current requirements for the minor.

### **Students Admitted to Minors Established Spring 2014 or Later**

Students admitted to a minor established Spring 2014 or later will follow the requirements for the minor in accordance with the new minor policy.

### **Students Currently Enrolled in Specializations**

Students currently enrolled in a specialization will continue to follow the requirements for that specialization that were in effect the term they were admitted to the specialization.

### **Students Enrolled in Specializations During the Conversion**

Students who are enrolled in a specialization during the two-year conversion process will follow the requirements for the specialization that were in effect the term they were admitted to the specialization. Students who do not complete the requirements for the specialization prior to Fall 2015 will be administratively moved to the minor. Advisors should work closely with students during the transition time to ensure they are progressing toward completion of requirements.

Deans, Directors, and Chairpersons

May 30, 2013

Page 6

**Resources:**

Procedural questions concerning the conversion of undergraduate specializations to minors may be directed to Joy Speas, University Curriculum Administrator, [jspeas@msu.edu](mailto:jspeas@msu.edu) or 355-8420.

*Available Resources for the Conversion*

Guidelines for Minors

<http://www.reg.msu.edu/Read/UCC/minorguidelines.pdf>

List of Current Specializations needing Conversion

<https://www.reg.msu.edu/AcademicPrograms/Programs.asp?PType=SPCU>

Cc: June Youatt, Acting Provost  
Doug Estry, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education and Dean  
of Undergraduate Studies  
Karen Klomparens, Associate Provost for Graduate Education and Dean  
of The Graduate School  
Nicole Rovig, University Registrar  
Joy Speas, University Curriculum Administrator