Yale College Council
Multidisciplinary Course Offerings
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INTRODUCTION

Yale College prides itself on providing students a comprehensive liberal arts education, and the nature of this education—the achievement of freedom and flexibility within balance—is the very reason many undergraduates chose to come to Yale. The following is an excerpt from the “Undergraduate Curriculum” page on Yale’s official website; it describes Yale’s own approach to education as:

“... a liberal arts education, one that aims to cultivate a broadly informed, highly disciplined intellect without specifying in advance how that intellect will be used. Such an approach to learning regards college as a phase of exploration, a place for the exercise of curiosity, and an opportunity for the discovery of new interests and abilities. The College does not seek primarily to train students in the particulars of a given career, although some students may elect to receive more of that preparation than others. Instead, its main goal is to instill knowledge and skills that students can bring to bear in whatever work they eventually choose. This philosophy of education corresponds with that expressed in the Yale Report of 1828, which draws a distinction between ‘expanding [the mind’s] powers, and storing it with knowledge.’ Acquiring facts is important, but learning how to think critically and creatively in a variety of ways takes precedence.

To ensure that study is neither too narrowly focused nor too diffuse, the College stands behind the principle of distribution of studies as strongly as it supports the principle of concentration.”

For the purposes of this report, we would like to focus particularly on the student who “elects to receive more preparation” and the “strong support of the principle of concentration.”

Yale College values balance and comprehensiveness, and urges students to view the world with a broad lens that can be focused. Yale also values the importance of synthesis and the interconnectedness of academic fields. Students currently have a few different opportunities to pursue to interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary studies. In order from least formalized to most formalized, students have a) approximately 12 elective credit openings, b) approximately 12 distributional credit requirements, c)
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four Multidisciplinary Academic Programs to choose from, and d) approximately 95
majors [including those which are B.A. or B.S.] to choose from, of which they can
select up to two. At face value, these four pathways seem sufficient to fulfill a
student’s need for “preparation” and “concentration”; however, each has certain
qualities about it that make it difficult for Yale undergraduates to pursue
inter/multidisciplinary studies with ease or certification (i.e the receipt of a formal
certificate for inclusion on a transcript and/or resume).

Although distributional requirements (DRs) and elective options allow students to
explore and pursue other academic interests, they do not provide students with the
opportunity to completely pursue legitimate secondary academic interests.
Distributional requirements are narrowed to two per category (of which there are
six), providing a broad lens for students but not a pathway for focus. Elective options
allow students to pursue academic interests outside their major(s) that may have
been found in the fulfillment of DRs; however, it can be difficult to craft a course
following around such an interest when, outside of majors, courses are not
organized in a clearly thematic or topical way. Additionally, even if students are able
to craft a course program for a specific secondary academic interest, they receive no
recognition or certification for achieving preparation and concentration in an
additional field of study outside their major(s).

Undergraduates can find a clear, well resourced, and well advised interdisciplinary
course structure through the pursuit of one of the four Multidisciplinary Academic
Programs (MAPs) Yale College has to offer, yet even these have limitations. MAPs
are not fully institutionalized in Yale College’s academic infrastructure. They are
dependent on the interest and dedication of students and faculty from year to year
and are also up for constant review. MAPs are also limited in their capacity;
undergraduates must apply to MAPs in their sophomore year and only a certain
number (usually no more than a few dozen students per MAP) of applicants are
accepted. Put succinctly, MAPs are not readily available to students and are also
limited in their subject areas. Additionally, students who can successfully pursue and
complete a MAP have taken on a secondary field of academic concentration but
receive no form of recognition on transcripts or diplomas.

The option that is theoretically most available and formalized for students to pursue
multi/interdisciplinary studies is the ability to double major (many majors being
multi/interdisciplinary themselves, such as Ethics, Politics, and Economics). Ideally, if
a student has two or more strong academic interests, they would pursue two majors. The problem with this route is that it assumes a student’s secondary academic interest(s) is large or strong enough to warrant a double major. There is merit in a student’s caution against double majoring for the sake of double majoring, as any Yale academic adviser can attest, because it requires extra energy, effort, and time commitment, all forms of academic capital that are precious to Yale undergraduates. From our anecdotal conversations as well as targeted focus group discussions with Yale undergraduates, we have found that the pursuit of secondary, inter/multidisciplinary academic pursuits becomes an all-encompassing endeavor for many undergraduates. The open-endedness and lack of structure for electives and distributional requirements make it hard for students to develop a concentration in a specific field or fields outside their major, and MAPs simply are not an option for the vast majority of students because of their limited capacity and subject areas. These problems push students with legitimate secondary academic interests toward double majoring, which may or may not be right for their particular interest(s). In short, students either pursue inter/multidisciplinary studies in an unstructured piecemeal fashion when they desire structure, or they double major to achieve structure when double majoring does not necessarily meet their specific interests or capacities as a student and is therefore an unwise academic decision. Through extensive conversations with undergraduates in focus groups, we have discovered that many Yale undergraduates have more than one academic interest and want to pursue these interests in a structured, supported, officially certified, and incentivized manner, but not necessarily by taking on an additional major. This report outlines concrete avenues through which Yale College can advance student “preparation” and “concentration,” two concepts it values in its academic creed.

PEER INSTITUTIONS
The University of California at Berkeley, a peer institution of Yale’s, has a program called “Course Threads” which is described as the following according to its official website:

“Course Threads allow Berkeley undergraduates to explore intellectual themes connecting courses across departments and disciplines. Without creating new majors or minors, Course Threads highlight connections among existing courses and help students develop a breadth and depth of knowledge in particular topics.”
Course Threads stems from Berkeley’s idea that the world, and therefore academic and professional fields, are incontrovertibly interconnected. All Course Thread sequences are centralized on the above website and some examples of these sequences are “Culture and Globalization”, “Technologies and Writing”, and “Law and Humanities”. The Course Threads program is supported by a number of departments and centers on Berkeley’s campus. Students must complete at least three courses within in a particular sequence in order to be eligible to receive an official certificate in that field of study after completing a final project at an end of the semester symposium.”

DATA ANALYSIS

In YCC’s 2016 Fall Survey, undergraduate students were asked which multidisciplinary areas of study they were most interested in pursuing, and out of 1414 respondents, the following are the areas of the study with the most interest (in order of popularity): Public Policy, Legal Studies, Bioethics, Urban Studies, Entrepreneurship, Robotics and Intelligent Systems, Communications, Ethnography, and Medieval Studies. With this data in mind, YCC has since strongly encouraged the Yale College administration to expand student access to multidisciplinary studies. In the early fall of 2017, the Yale College Council became aware of the Berkeley Course Threads program and, in conjunction with the Dean of Yale College and the Dean of Undergraduate Education, launched an investigation into the implementation of a similar expansion of multidisciplinary studies at Yale. With this in mind, the YCC wanted fresh data on student interest in multidisciplinary fields, so in the 2017 Fall Survey students were asked to confirm the most popular fields of study from the previous fall survey and suggest any others. With over 1300 respondents, all nine fields from the 2016 survey received support from at least 135 students or more, with Public Policy again leading in popularity. Food Systems and Finance/Accounting were added as the most popular write-in options.
RECOMMENDATIONS

With all of these factors in mind, the following is the strong recommendation of the YCC regarding multi/interdisciplinary studies at Yale College:

1. The YCC recommends the creation of a Course Threads-style website that compiles all the relevant classes across departments and majors that fall into the following most popular fields of secondary study:
   - Public Policy
   - Urban Studies
   - Legal Studies and Humanities
   - Bioethics and Medical Humanities
   - Robotics and Intelligent Systems
   - Entrepreneurship
   - Communications
   - Ethnography
   - Disability Studies
   - Medieval Studies
   - Food Systems

   This website would be managed by the Yale College Council in conjunction with the Registrar’s Office and would be updated every semester by the Registrar in order to allow students to make fully informed shopping and course enrollment decisions. Such a website could be linked to existing course websites like ybb.yale.edu or created as a separate entity. This website should be developed and launched in the near term, ideally by the start of the 2018-19 Academic Year.

2. In the long term, the YCC advocates that these fields of inter/multidisciplinary studies be incorporated as formalized areas of concentration or certification that students can be legitimately recognized for having completed this secondary field of study. An instructive example of this can be seen at Princeton.

To be clear, the YCC does not recommend that Yale implement a carbon copy system of Course Threads; rather, we suggest that Yale adapt this model to best fit the community and academic ethos. The YCC is also not advocating for the eventual creation of minors. It simply wants to see the pursuit of secondary academic interests eased and incentivized for students who clearly possess an interest in pursuing them.