TO: Karen Sprague, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies
FROM: Ian F. McNeely, Chair, Undergraduate Council
RE: Report on General Social Sciences (GSS) major
DATE: June 3, 2010

The Undergraduate Council unanimously endorses the revised (May 14, 2010) proposal for a General Social Sciences (GSS) major subject to conditions 1 through 3 below.

Administratively, this proposal revives a thirty-year-old major. Intellectually, it creates four entirely new majors in the form of four tracks, each with a curriculum independent of the others. Given the dangers of sprawl in a large, non-discipline-based program such as this, the Council feels that additional safeguards are needed to ensure that students in GSS undertake a coherent course of study designed by faculty and supported by good advising. Combining these safeguards with the ample administrative commitment shown by the College of Arts and Sciences has the real potential to produce a flexibly structured program that responds creatively to student needs while maintaining high intellectual standards.

1. **Faculty subcommittees.** Active faculty participation is the *sine qua non* of academic quality control and this standard is applied to all programs the Council reviews. Subcommittees should therefore be formed within or in addition to the GSS Faculty Advisory Committee to oversee each track. Each subcommittee should be charged with defining the course requirements, articulating the pedagogical rationale, and monitoring the overall quality of the relevant track. Those serving in this capacity should have a specific interest in the applicable subject matter (e.g. social studies teaching or the study of crime). They should also be drawn from the various campus constituencies with intellectual stakes in the subject (e.g. Education and History for the social studies track). Again, faculty are needed to provide not only administrative oversight of the program as a whole, but also intellectual oversight of its constituent curricula.

2. **New tracks.** The current proposal envisions the addition or deletion of tracks in the future but does not specify a mechanism to do so. Whenever a new track is to be created, then, the Undergraduate Council should meet with the GSS director and at least one delegate from the relevant subcommittee to review its proposed course requirements and pedagogical rationale and discuss quality control and advising issues specific to that track. Likewise, whenever an existing track is to be retired, the Council should meet with the GSS director to discuss reasons for the phase-out.

3. **Follow-up.** The four tracks detailed in the current proposal should be treated as new tracks for the purposes of finalizing their course lists and honing their pedagogical rationales. Otherwise, however, they should be
regarded as having been endorsed in principle by the Council, since great care has already been shown for constructing sound and sustainable track requirements. A brief, collegial review during 2010-11 should suffice to address any remaining concerns after the subcommittees have been formed and had a chance to do their work. The Council is particularly interested in knowing whether the subcommittees can focus the tracks more, to limit overlap with other programs (e.g. between the Applied Economics track and the Business minor), to build in identifiable sets of skills (e.g. in the crime track), and to guard against students’ cherry-picking easy courses or choosing them randomly from a large list (e.g. in the social studies track).

The Council also offers the following recommendations on advising and publicity. While these matters are typically left to departmental discretion, this is a non-department-based program unusually prone to the problems of aimless students and uninformed advisors.

4. **Publicity.** Publicity materials (e.g. brochures and a well-designed website) should be provided to faculty, staff, and student advisors charged with recommending and explaining the program to prospective majors. These materials should include sample recommended course sequences outlining different possible trajectories within each track (e.g. criminal justice work vs. preparation for law school within the “crime” track). Sample sequences should combine intellectual rigor with career preparation and be vetted by the relevant subcommittee. They offer one way to give focus to the tracks while preserving flexibility in course offerings.

5. **Advising.** Another way to ensure that students construct meaningful, coherent sequences of courses within the tracks is to require that each one meet formally at least once with a GSS-affiliated advisor. At that time, the student should have filled out a requirements checklist and come prepared to defend his/her selection of courses verbally or in writing to the advisor. The Council suggests the Humanities program’s checklist as a model: [http://www.uoregon.edu/~humprog/hum.htm](http://www.uoregon.edu/~humprog/hum.htm). The International Studies major also has exemplary advising and support procedures in place.

Finally, while budgetary issues lie outside the Council’s purview, proposals forwarded to the Vice Provost, the Provost, and state-level review bodies (if applicable) are required to provide a budget impact statement.

6. **Budget.** The budgetary implications of additional advising support, publicity materials, and faculty incentives to participate in program oversight, if any, should be addressed in the final proposal.

The proposed GSS major has been many years in the making and is already the product of extensive work and campuswide consultation. With the additional safeguards described above, the Council feels that this new program can offer interdisciplinary curricula that are intellectually exciting, pedagogically sound, and relevant to students.