



PATHS OF INDEPENDENT MAJORS

WITH THE HELP OF A FACULTY ADVISER, A STUDENT CAN DRAW UP A PLAN OF STUDY THAT FOCUSES ON UNIQUE INTERESTS AND SUBMIT IT TO A BOARD FOR APPROVAL.

Ask Cornellians what they like most about the university's academic environment, and many will cite the diversity of courses and fields of study. Indeed, Cornell offers a multitude of majors. From among seven schools, undergraduates can select hundreds of concentrations, ranging from liberal arts standbys, such as English, to evolving disciplines, such as biological and environmental engineering. One of Cornell's most

unique fields of study is the one that students define themselves: in almost every college, it is possible for undergraduates to design and pursue their own curriculums. With the help of a faculty adviser, a student can draw up a plan of study that focuses on unique interests and submit it to a board for approval. A select few take this option and follow their own concentrations. Dominic Frongillo '05 and Aditya Bhatia '05 are two Cornellians who pursued the independent major path.

Education. During the summer of 2004, he traveled to Costa Rica to work on issues of economic improvement in a small, rural community. Throughout his studies, Frongillo relied on the guidance of two professors: Ray Swisher, PAM, and Gary Evans, DEA. Evans was especially influential in Frongillo's honors project on community youth resources, in which Frongillo investigated how children benefit from the presence of educational and recreational resources.

Through his work at Cornell and in the field, Frongillo came to the conclusion that solving environmental problems is the key to solving community issues. He wants to apply what he learned about social and environmental systems to broader society. While he cares about issues around the world, for now he is focusing on problems close to home: "It's extremely important to get an international perspective in order to be multicultural and to be a global citizen. But too many people go off into the world thinking that problems exist in other countries, when many problems exist here. I think I'm in a perfect position to shape world policy by making a difference

Sheila Markler



Dominic Frongillo '05

Frongillo, College of Human Ecology, realized he wanted to pursue an individual curriculum during his first year at Cornell. He enrolled in the college as a policy analysis and management (PAM) major, eager to learn about public policy and how it can help remedy community

problems. As his freshman year progressed, Frongillo found that PAM's requisite quantitative courses left him little room to learn about policy at the local level. He soon discovered that Human Ecology offers undergraduates the option of designing their own curriculums. After consulting with professors, Frongillo mapped out a plan of study that catered to his passion. He borrowed courses from PAM and from another Human Ecology major, design and environmental analysis (DEA), to create his concentration—community development policy.

In his four years at Cornell, Frongillo gained a wealth of experience, both in and out of the classroom. His courses took him beyond the realms of PAM and DEA to the Departments of City and Regional Planning, Developmental Sociology, and

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Aditya Bhatia '05

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where I am.” While still an undergraduate, Frongillo began his career as a local policy reformer by serving on the planning board for the nearby town of Caroline. He intends to continue working with the board in the future.

Upon leaving Cornell, Frongillo was open to many options. A graduate degree in city planning or environmental studies was a possibility, but he wanted to gain more experience working in communities before going back to school. What is he doing now? Frongillo is an intern for the Tompkins County Planning Department, where he is working on the implementation of the county’s comprehensive plan. And he plans to run for town board in the Town of Caroline—probably the youngest person ever to run. In a couple of years, he sees graduate school and the Peace Corps as his major pursuits.

Like Frongillo, Bhatia also pursued an independent major path soon after arriving at Cornell. As a freshman in the College of Arts and Sciences, Bhatia found himself drawn to economics and computer science. Majoring in both fields seemed logical, but after spending hours studying theories and codes, Bhatia felt overwhelmed by the abstract nature of his studies. He decided to explore the independent major program offered by the College of Arts and Sciences. His goal was to develop a plan of study that combined theoretical courses with ones that would have relevance to the real world. For Bhatia, the key was integrating courses from Cornell’s other colleges into his curriculum: “I thought that, if I could do an independent major in Arts and Sciences and combine Arts courses with non-Arts courses, I could get the best of both worlds—I could take some theoretical courses, but combine them with practical work.”

Bhatia turned to Dan Huttenlocher, Johnson Graduate School of Management, for help. With his background in computer science and business management, Huttenlocher was a good match for Bhatia. Under his guidance, Bhatia drew up a plan of study that borrowed from computer science, economics, business management, and law. He named his curriculum information systems, and got approval to dive into it.

A major in information systems allowed Bhatia to experience firsthand the diversity of Cornell’s academic offerings. With the exception of Architecture, Art, and Planning, Bhatia took courses in all of Cornell’s colleges and in one of its graduate schools. His work in the School of Hotel Administration was especially rewarding. As a junior, Bhatia partnered with professors Erica Wagner and Gabe Piccoli on a yearlong research project. He investigated the technology behind the information systems that hotels use to book rooms over the internet and then attempted to build a system by innovating on the existing model. Applying theory to a real-world issue, Bhatia was able to put his knowledge of computer science to practical use and address a concern of the hospitality industry.

Following graduation, Bhatia moved to New York City to begin a career in management consulting. He predicted that his major would help him to excel in his job: “Since so much of business today is driven by technology, my background is incredibly useful.” Bhatia works for McKinsey and Company, the world’s top management consulting firm, which serves every type of business and 85 percent of the global Fortune 100 companies.

Both Bhatia and Frongillo credit the individual curriculum option for allowing them to make the most out of their time at Cornell. When they embarked on the independent major path a little more than four years ago, they sought to make sense of a vast academic landscape. Upon leaving Cornell, they took with them a wealth of knowledge and experience, along with fond memories from the road less traveled.

Sheila Yasmin Marikar '05

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