

**UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
GOVERNING COUNCIL**

Report # 397 of the Academic Appeals Committee  
**July 10, 2018**

To the Academic Board  
University of Toronto.

Your Committee reports that it held a hearing on Friday, June 1, 2018 at which the following members were present:

Assistant Dean Sara Faherty (Chair)  
Professor Normand Labrie, Faculty Governor  
Mr. Aidan Fishman, Student Governor

Hearing Secretary:  
Ms. Krista Osbourne, Administrative Clerk, Appeals, Discipline and Faculty Grievances

**Appearances:**

**For the Student Appellant:**

Ms. A.M. (“the Student”), *via* audio-video connection.

**For the Faculty of Arts and Science:**

Professor Melanie Woodin, Associate Dean, Undergraduate Issues and Academic Planning  
Mr. Thomas MacKay, Director, Faculty Governance & Curriculum Services

**The Appeal**

This appeal relates to the Student, A.M.’s, request to have the Biology & Physics Major Program removed from her academic record. The original program required students to take as few as three courses from Biology, which is what A.M. did. She laments that the word “Biology” appears first in the title of the major, since she ended up taking many more Physics courses.

A.M. raised the issue that the major, which no longer exists, is misleading and that the impression that it creates has created confusion and been detrimental to her career. The Student is concerned that this rationale was over-emphasised in earlier decisions regarding her petition, and that she also wants the Biology & Physics Major removed on the independent principle that she is entitled to a meaningful transcript, regardless of the practical consequences. The Student cites the University of Toronto Transcript Policy, which reads, in part, “The transcript should be a meaningful reflection of the student’s academic activity and achievement.” Your Committee does not believe the earlier decisions were incorrect in their assessment of the external difficulties experienced by the Student, however for the purposes of this appeal, the panel focused on the purely principled argument.

The Student expressly rejects the Division's explanation that it does not retroactively alter transcripts, relying on the Division's subsequent recognition of her General Physics Major as evidence that the Faculty of Arts and Science does, indeed, make retroactive changes to transcripts.

### **The Facts**

The Student, A.M., enrolled as a Faculty of Arts and Science undergraduate student at Trinity College in the fall of 1988. In November of 1991, she was conferred a 3-year Bachelor of Science degree. This conferral was based on the program requirements A.M. had completed at the end of the 1991 summer session. Completion of the Biology & Physics Major (which no longer exists) was confirmed as a requirement of the 3-year degree. At that time, the Biology & Physics Major was the only program major for which A.M. had met the degree requirements.

Subsequent to this degree conferral, A.M. enrolled in additional sessions ultimately converting her 3-year degree to a 4-year degree, and in the course of those additional studies, completing the requirements for a minor program in English, a minor program in Mathematics, and a general major in Physics. That general major was initially left off A.M.'s transcript, and was formally confirmed during the summer of 2016. All of these major and minor programs now appear on A.M.'s transcript.

It is not clear why the General Physics Major in physics was not captured in the transcript earlier than 2016. At some point around 2001, the Student requested to have the General Major in Physics recognized. In an email dated October 12, 2001 Brian Statt, the Undergraduate Associate Chair of the physics department confirmed that with a substitution of one course for another course, A.M. had completed the requirements for the General Major. Professor Statt explained that he would await her POSA form. At that point the trail goes cold—the Major in General Physics was not formally recognized until fifteen years later. We do not know why no further action took place for so long. In 2016 A.M. petitioned to have her transcript show a completed Major in General Physics program and to have the original major of Biology and Physics removed. The General Physics Major was recognized, but the Faculty did not agree to remove the completed Biology & Physics Major.

The Division argues that Student was competent to make her original decision to graduate with a 3-year degree in Physics & Biology in 1991. It was the only Major Program available to her at the time she graduated, because it was the only program for which she had met the Major requirements. The Student explained that she chose the Major because at the time she was “frantic to make something fit,” and the Biology & Physics title was the only title that fit. A.M. told this Committee that she chose the Biology & Physics Major because she did not have any other options. The Faculty of Arts and Science points out that the 3-year degree conferral had legal and financial consequences from which the Student benefitted, and that it would be a distortion of the academic record of the Student to remove the Major now.

The Division asserts that the primary function of transcripts is to present an accurate historical record of students' studies. It was willing to include the additional Major Program in Physics and English Minor Program of Study when they were completed (in one case, due to an oversight of some kind, many years after it was completed), but it will not agree to remove the first degree from A.M.'s transcript. The Faculty of Arts and Science emphasizes that the retroactive recognition of the Major Program in Physics was approved only because A.M. had actually met the Major requirements at the time she earned her 4-year degree. Even though the Major was recorded *post hoc*, it reflected the academic record *at the time the degree was earned*. In other words, the recognition was a correction of the record, not a change to the Student's history.

The Division also explained that when a student can demonstrate extenuating circumstances that are compelling changes can be made to transcripts. Again, those are rare, and are framed as corrections to the record in the sense that they are granted only when the Faculty believes that had the Student made a request for an accommodation at the time it was needed such a request would have been granted. Those exceptions are made when a student can show that he or she was too unwell to request an accommodation at the time. Retroactive changes based on compassion are granted when events are shown to be out of a student's control.

### **Decisions Below**

In a decision dated January 13, 2017, the Committee on Standing denied the Student's request to have the Biology & Physics Major removed from her undergraduate transcript. The Committee wrote that a matter of academic history and record (*i.e.*, the completion of a program of study pertaining to and integral to the composition of the Bachelor of Science, conferred November 1991) should not be retroactively altered.

The Academic Appeals Board heard the Student's petition on November 3, 2017. In a letter dated November 16, 2017 the Board informed A.M. that they had unanimously voted to deny her appeal of the Committee on Standing's decision on the grounds that there was no compelling need for an exception to the general rule that transcripts should not be retroactively altered. The Board determined that A.M. was fit to make the decision to graduate with a Biology and Physics Major.

### **Decision**

This appeal raises the issue of the purpose and function of student transcripts. The Student asserts that transcripts should be "meaningful," and asserts that given her subsequent completion of the degree requirements for both a Minor in English a Major in Physics, it would be more meaningful for her transcript to omit any reference to her first degree in Biology & Physics. However the Student herself repeated several times during the hearing that "anyone who looked at [her] transcript could see" that she does not have a strong background in Biology and that she has studied physics and math much more extensively. This Committee agrees with the Student on this point, and interprets that reality as an indication that the transcript *is* accurate and meaningful. It correctly lists the title of the Major Program she completed in 1991, it goes on to show additional courses, the fact that she converted her 3-year degree to a 4-year degree, and that she completed many more courses in Physics and Math later in her academic career. The additional Physics Major and Math Minor underscore these pursuits. The fact that it reflects her history of starting with a 3-year degree in Biology & Physics and then persistently building on that is an accurate reflection of how her studies progressed.

For these reasons, your Committee does not agree with parties' argument that there is a tension between this Student's transcript being "meaningful" and its being "accurate." The transcript currently lists the Major Programs the Student has completed. The Division was clear about its reasoning for allowing a completed Major program to be retroactively added to a transcript. The Faculty of Arts and Science relies on the rules and requirements in place at the time a student convoked, and if a request to list a Major would have been granted had been made at the time, it is willing to state that the student met the requirements. This is because it was accurate at the time of graduation, and remains accurate as targeted to that date.

The Division is not willing to remove a completed program, however, because to take that off would make the transcript less accurate, not more accurate. The academic history would be falsified, because the Student would not have been eligible to graduate in 1991 without the Biology & Physics Major. It was the only Program of Study for which she had met the degree requirements.

### **Additional Remarks**

Two possible additional steps arose during this appeal over which this Committee has no jurisdiction. First, the Registrar for the Faculty of Arts and Science has offered to write a letter explaining the circumstances of her academic history on behalf of A.M. if she should find that useful. Second, during the hearing, the Student suggested that she believes she has also completed the requirements for a Major Program in Mathematics. One of her requested remedies is to change her Minor in Math to a Major in Math. We do not have the expertise to determine whether her transcript shows that she met the requirements for such a change, nor do we have the jurisdiction to make such a change. A.M. has not made a formal request to have that Major listed on her transcript, but she is free to do so.

This Committee urges the Student to consider pursuing one or both of these options.

Finally, the Division, when prodded, was able to articulate a coherent and clear explanation of the circumstances under which it is willing to make changes to transcripts. This Committee suggests that this explanation be included in its transcript policy or calendar so students can clearly understand the factors that go into these decisions.

### **Conclusion:**

The Students' request for the removal of her Biology & Physics Major Program of Study completed in 1991 from her transcript is denied.