

International
Institute
University of Wisconsin-Madison

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS MAJOR
226 Ingraham Hall
1155 Observatory Drive
Madison, WI 53706 U.S.A.
Phone: 608/263-6916
Web: <http://www.wisc.edu/ir/>

December 18, 1996

an
~~Ms. Judy Craig~~
Associate Dean
Letters and Science
South Hall
University of Wisconsin

19 1996

Dear Judy:

Enclosed is the assessment plan for the International Relations Program.

Happy Holiday,

MB
Michael Barnett,
Chair

International Relations Program
College of Letters and Science
University of Wisconsin-Madison

PLAN FOR ASSESSMENT OF THE
UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR

December 1996

Introduction

This document outlines the assessment plan for the undergraduate major as stipulated by the College of Letters and Sciences. Because the International Relations Program is an interdisciplinary major, with no faculty lines of its own, a very modest budget, and wholly dependent on the resources and curricular decisions of other departments, this plan will adopt a conservative orientation.

We have undertaken this assessment plan with the understanding that the modalities include four principal steps: 1) the articulation of a set of educational goals and objectives for the major; 2) the identification and description of the instruments to be used to assess student achievements at important stages in the program; 3) the development of a feedback mechanism so that the results of the instruments described in step two can be used to improve the major; and, 4) the establishment of a realistic timetable for achieving these three steps.

Educational Goals and Objectives

The International Relations Program, home to over five hundred students, is designed to:

- * provide a broad general background in international and transnational political, social, economic, commercial and environmental affairs.
- * couple that general education with the necessary background in the comparative study of politics, economics, security and culture in the world's major regional areas.
- * integrate coursework that lays a foundation for professional training in a wide variety of areas.

The study of international relations is rapidly changing in response to, first, global and regional changes, and, second, the development of new disciplinary approaches to global politics. One of the important intellectual responses to the end of the Cold War has been a decentering of the study of international relations away from the focus on East-West relations and toward a plurality of other concerns, processes, and problems that are global and regional in character. Not only has the object of inquiry changed, but so too have the defining approaches. Whereas once political science dominated the study of international relations, it is more common to find other disciplines involved in such endeavors.

The architecture of the International Relations Programs has two principal pillars that reflect these intellectual changes. The first pillar is interdisciplinarity. International relations students take courses from a variety of disciplines: economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, history, business, and on and on. In many respects, an interdisciplinary major in international relations is rather novel in the United States (the home for many international relations programs is in Political Science), but we understand that novelty to be absolutely essential in an era of globalization and in which the strengths of all the disciplines must be utilized to make sense of the growing density of interactions at the global level.

The second pillar is the attempt to marry regional and global studies. Over half our majors specialize in "regional tracks," that is, adopt a regional focus for a substantial part of their major. Those students who select a regional track graduate with a detailed understanding of the language, culture, politics, and economics of a particular region. But that regional knowledge is situated within a generalized understanding of global processes. In this way, the international relations program marries the global and the regional through an interdisciplinary lens.

We see interdisciplinarity and the global-regional nexus as the International Relations Program's intellectual strength. But successfully integrating these themes into a coherent and workable undergraduate major is a major challenge. Many of our proposals are designed to assess how well we have accomplished this task and how we might do better.

While the subject of global politics and the disciplinary approaches might be changing, the general skills and capacities that we hope to impart to our majors through their coursework remains unchanged. These skills include:

- * an ability to think analytically and critically;
- * the capacity to write effectively, clearly, and persuasively;
- * an ability to identify sources of information available to provide possible answers to the questions and concerns at hand.
- * some knowledge of the methods of the social sciences.

These skills and capacities are designed to allow our students to pursue their post-graduate interests and career objectives. Last year we did a survey of our alumni and identified three broad categories of students with regard to post-graduate orientation: 1) those who stop at the B.A. and pursue an occupation in any number of fields; 2) those who proceed to obtain post-graduate education, evenly divided between law and business; and, 3) a few who decide to enter a Ph.D. program. Therefore, one of the critical issues is to develop an assessment plan that is able to assist our students regardless of the career path they choose while recognizing that these different paths can have distinct educational demands.

These three features of the International Relations Program - an understanding of the study international relations, the skills acquired through that study, and the ability to use these skills in various fields after graduation - inform the following features of the assessment plan.

Methods for Assessment

Before we proceed to describe some of the methods for assessment, we want to emphasize the following points.

1. We have already developed and instituted a series of assessment activities that are designed to ascertain, first, the quality of the program from the vantage point of the students and, second, the types of careers pursued by our majors. In each instance we have attempted to act on the knowledge generated by these assessment mechanisms to strengthen various features of the major.
2. The International Relations Program is dependent on the resources and curricular decisions of other departments. Our assessment plan should not be interpreted as an assessment of any of these other departments. We restrict our assessment to the overall coherence and architecture of the program.
3. We will stress periodic rather than annual assessment activities. Not only do we not expect that greater frequency in assessment will generate more knowledge, but with only one staff member at 60% time it is impossible to engage in more exhaustive exercises. We will strive for a three to five year cycle, which is designed to correspond with the appointment of a new chair for the program.

These considerations now stated, we intend to use the following instruments in our assessment.

1. General Survey of Undergraduate Majors. On this survey we intend to ascertain what the students view as the strengths and the weaknesses of the program. We will also identify a series of possible initiatives and then ask the students to judge how favorably they view them. One possible initiative is the development of a core course for International Relations Program that can serve as the foundation course for our students.
2. Assessment of Adequacy of Advising. Because ours is an interdisciplinary major the success of the program is highly dependent on the quality of undergraduate advising. By its very nature, the International Relations major must remain flexible to meet the needs of the student body in an environment where course selections and offerings are not consistently offered. Further, there are a variety of courses offered, e.g. special topics, that are solid choices for International Relations majors but are not part of the major on record. The advisor plays a key role in identifying and disseminating information to students about course selection and availability. Further, the advisor, given the structure of the office, plays a key administrative role as well as acting as liaison between: 1) students and various departments; 2) academic and administrative staff; and, 3) departments. We intend to ask students a series of questions concerning the quality of advising and to undertake our own study of the advising resources available to international relations majors in comparison to other majors on campus.

3. **Survey of Academic Actions and Course Offerings.** Related to advising and the flexibility of the major, we intend to quantify the nature of the academic actions taken for students in the major. It is hoped that this effort will reveal information pertaining to the availability of courses prescribed for the major as requirements, along with "tightness" of the major in terms of how students develop coherent plans of study. Concurrent with that survey, will be a historical analysis of how often courses listed as part of the major are offered.

4. **Survey of International Relations Programs or other Interdisciplinary Programs at Peer Institutions.** We will examine how other institutions manage interdisciplinary programs focused on international relations. This survey may enable us to find creative solutions and structural changes we might consider for the program. Further, we will use this information as a tool to refine our knowledge, curricular and educational goals.

Feedback Mechanism

The Chair and the Advisor of the International Relations Program will take the lead in the assessment process and determining whether and how to incorporate the knowledge gained from the assessment into curricular reform. It is quite likely that an ad hoc undergraduate committee will be formed to consider the results of the assessment and to consider next steps. On the basis of the review the Program will issue a report that will include:

1. A biannual summary of the knowledge goals which the Program expects its majors to achieve. We expect that this summary will be relatively extensive the first few years of its issue, but less after that once the principal assessments have been ascertained and reforms have been considered and hopefully implemented.
2. How the major successfully achieves the educational goals established by the Program.
3. Suggestions for curricular changes if, 1) indicated and warranted by the assessment, 2) permitted by changes and developments in other departments.
4. Suggestions for changes in the measures of assessment if warranted.

Timetable for Implementation

During the first semester of 1997-98 academic year, the Chair and the Advisor will initiate the assessment measures listed above. We hope to receive some of the results of this assessment by the end of the academic year 1997-1998.