

Assessment Report 2006
International Studies Major (formerly International Relations Major)

Educational Goals and Objectives

The International Studies Major is home to nearly 500 students. It is designed to provide students a broad, general background in international political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental affairs. It is also designed to combine this broad education with expertise in a particular regional or substantive area of international affairs. Traditionally, students have chosen a regional focus, but this has changed as the structure of the program has been altered in the last few years. We intend to lay the foundation for students to pursue a variety of careers including graduate training, professional schools, employment in the international business world, and working for globally oriented international or non-governmental organizations.

The study of international relations changed rapidly with the end of the Cold War. The once solid focus on East-West tensions quickly faded in the 1990s as new concerns began to enter both academic work in the field as well as policy concerns of political leaders. Since the end of the Cold War, it is fair to say that no new paradigm has become dominant in the study of international affairs, although issues ranging from the environment, global health, terrorism, and development have garnered increasing attention.

The goal of the international studies major is to expose students to these changes from an interdisciplinary perspective. While political science was the dominant discipline to consider international issues during the Cold War, this is no longer the case. To account for these changes in substantive issues and approaches within international affairs, the IS major is founded on two pillars.

The first is interdisciplinarity. Students majoring in IS take courses from a wide variety of disciplines: political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, agriculture and applied economics, history, business, communications, etc. The list of departments offering courses that fulfill requirements in the major is long. Most students are double majors in another discipline – most in one of the areas just listed. Moreover, nearly every year since it became a requirement for IS majors, the gateway course (IS 301) has been team taught by faculty from different departments.

The second pillar is a focus on building skills required to be competitive in the global marketplace. This is accomplished in multiple ways. Traditionally, the major attempted to marry interdisciplinary studies with regional studies (e.g., Middle East studies) as a means to this end. While this is still important to the IS major and to many students who declare the major, more students taking an alternate route: building skills in the sciences (e.g., health-oriented areas or environmental studies), business (e.g., the international business certificate), or economics. We have strived to allow either track in the IS major – students are not forced to take a series of regional studies classes should

they desire another option. This was a change brought with the reformulated IS major in May 2001. Again, the purpose was not to *deemphasize* regional studies but rather a growing awareness that many international affairs topics are truly global in scope.

The major sets of skills we hope to impart to our majors through their coursework is as follows:

- * 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 answers to questions as well as the ability to determine the quality of that information;
- * knowledge of methods in the social sciences and humanities;
- * foreign language skills to achieve a level of basic communication.

These skills are designed to allow our students to pursue their post-graduate interests and career objectives. Alumni survey's have shown that there are three broad areas pursued by graduates: 1) immediate post-graduation employment, often in businesses or the non-profit sector; 2) post-graduate education, often law or business, but increasingly terminal MA programs in international studies or political science; 3) PhD programs (although this is by far the smallest category). One challenge is to create an assessment plan to evaluate how the major is preparing students for each of these (diverse) options.

Recent Assessment Activities

Under the previous director, three sets of assessment activities took place between 1998-2000: an external review; student surveys; and alumni surveys. In response to these surveys, major changes were made in the (previously named) international relations major. First, there was a general broadening of the major to encompass more global-oriented themes such as human rights and the environment. This was made possible in part by a growing interest in these areas by several departments at UW, which could then contribute courses to these areas of study.

Second, in response to student concern over coherence in the major, an IS core course was create (IS 301), to be a broad overview of topics in international studies that stressed interdisciplinary studies. The one unforeseen problem was the popularity of the course. During the 2003-2005 period, some majors complained that they were unable to enroll in the course because of demand. In these cases, they were allowed to substitute other courses to not delay their graduation. According to student input, one problem had become that this "gateway" course, meant to provide an overview of the major, was often not taken until one's last semester. In response to this problem, starting in the spring of 2005, the course was offered as a large lecture format with several TAs to "clear" the demand for the course. This has been fairly successful although the course has now become more like a large introductory course in structure with power lectures and many TAs.

Third, as suggested by the previous external review, the previous director was successful at gaining faculty lines to help stabilize course offerings – a consistent complaint from previous surveys. There was success in recruiting one part-time faculty although there were two part-time lines initially given to the major (one was a victim of budget cuts after the search failed after one year). This is a step in the right direction and we hope that future lines, whether through cluster initiatives or other sources, will continue to allow us to consistently offer courses listed directly in the IS major.

Also, recent deal brokered between L&S and International Studies, the IS major is allowed to hire a half time assistant to the advisor using resources from the International Institute. L&S has agreed to fund a replacement lecturer once a year to support offering the core IS course twice a year. We hope that this new development (along with 2 years of large lectures) will help scale down the size of the IS 301 course to restore it to a more intimate setting, although as the major grows this becomes less and less possible.

In our next round of assessment, we hope to ascertain how successful these changes have been in responding to issues previously raised by our students and alumni. Before proceeding to our future plans for assessment, we should note a couple of important issues. First, the IS program remains almost completely dependent on resources and curricular decisions in other departments. Thus, we stress that our assessment plan does not address the quality of other departments, but rather the coherence and structure of the IS major.

Second, as noted in the previous assessment plan, we continue to stress periodic, rather than annual activities. Because we have few resources and fewer staff to conduct large-scale activities, we limit ourselves to periodic assessment, on the order of once every three to four years. We also note that in the immediate aftermath of the changed IS structure, the program has experienced some flux. On the positive side, the IS major now has a full time advisor position filled by one of the most able advisors in L&S, Christine Schindler. We consistently receive tremendous feedback on her skills and abilities to help make the IS major work well for students. Under the recent L&S/II deal, we also have a half-time staff employee for the foreseeable future to lessen the administrative burdens on the advisor and director.

On the negative side, the previous director departed at the end of the 2003-2004 academic year. An interim director held the position in 2004-2005 and the current director began in 2005-2006. This flux has meant there has been little opportunity to assess the immediate consequences of restructuring. Second, one of the main sources of courses and faculty has been political science, which lost all but one tenured and one untenured professor in international relations between 2003-2005, greatly limiting course availability. The positive externality has been that the interdisciplinary nature of the program is stronger than ever, with departments such as sociology, history, and economics filling the void with excellent courses. This said, we have no doubt that our planned student surveys will note this lack of courses in the recent past.

Future Assessment Activities

We plan to undertake two assessment activities beginning in the fall. First, we plan to undertake a survey of our undergraduate majors. We hope to receive feedback on issues ranging from course quality to course availability to advising with this survey. We plan to construct an on-line survey for this task. We will make a concerted effort to survey graduating seniors who are at the end of their work in the major and are in the best position to provide feedback on quality and coherence. Past surveys of students were a large impetus to restructuring the program, so we are especially hopeful to receive feedback relating to this new structure in the major.

Second, we are beginning a process of increasing outreach to IS major alumni. A major part of this outreach will include an alumni survey to help assess how our proposed education goals (especially in the restructured program) are assisting graduates in the work place as well as professional and graduate schools. We feel it will be especially instructive to compare recent graduate experiences with those educated under the previous set of (International Relations Major) requirements.

The data received from these surveys will be analyzed by the Chair, Advisor, staff member, and IS board. Should any changes be required in the structure of the major, those would be considered by the above personnel.