

**Skidmore College
International Affairs Assessment**

Program Experiences of Graduating Seniors, 2015

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Our investigation of student experiences and expectations for the class of 2015 was conducted with 34 students. Questions probed reasons for choosing the IA major and the perceived usefulness and resonance of required and elective courses. We also gathered opinions about Study Abroad, advising and the acquisitions of specific skill sets. Finally, we also collected student suggestions for improving the program. What follows is a brief summation of what we have learned.

Choosing the International Affairs (IA) Major

Students overwhelmingly claimed that what drove them to the IA major was its extreme interdisciplinarity. Students with broad and eclectic interests seem to have been drawn to the major. A few students did seem to see it almost as a default option – i.e. offering a path for students who had no strong interest in any subject area in particular. Some students chose IA because of a strong existing interest in Human Rights, and a couple observed developing an interest in the program because of an early exposure in the First Year London Experience to globalization.

Course Experiences

Student assessments of courses are frequently driven by their own prior interests. For instance, environmentally-inclined students are very passionate about courses dealing with the physical world (such as Politics of Food) while those who started out with an interest in global conflict were more positively disposed to courses offered under the IA or Government (GO) labels.

Noticeable frustration was expressed about both the IA book-end courses – IA101 and IA376 (senior capstone). Both were seen as imposing very high workload, and some students mentioned “feeling lost” or being “out of it” in both. IA101 was categorized as somewhat fragmented with students arguing that the various elements (physical, economic, political and cultural) were disconnected from each other, while IA376 was seen as having unreasonable expectations. At the same time, most students did see enormous value in working on independent research projects and presenting their work to an audience of IA faculty and students.

Study Abroad

The Study Abroad segment is a huge hit with the IA majors. What was invariably mentioned was the extent to which an unfamiliar cultural exposure served as an “earthshattering”, “life-changing” or “mind-blowing” experience. Some institutions were repeatedly cited as offering superior academic experiences. These included SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) at London, University College of London, Goldsmiths College, the University of Westminster, the Sorbonne and the Skidmore Shanghai Program. Consistently lower ratings were given to study abroad experiences in New Zealand, Australia and Denmark.

Advising

The IA majors' experience with advising at Skidmore appears to be mixed. When they are advised by the core IA faculty, they see the experience as a helpful one. But when they are advised by faculty who are more peripherally connected to the Program, they complain about being confused and even, on occasions, receiving misleading advice. A few students even mention being discouraged by advisors from opting for the IA major on the grounds that (a) it was a major with few future career opportunities and (b) it was a program with low standards. Students who disregarded this advice also report being pleasantly surprised to find out that neither of these warnings were valid. From a student perspective, one of the major problems they encountered was a lack of early exposure to many of the IA faculty. According to them, this translated into an inability to identify IA faculty (other than the director) who could advise them until they were way into their third or even fourth years at the college.

Skill Sets Gained in the Program

Response to this was mixed. Students who consciously focused on either the natural environment or developed a regional concentration (such as the Middle East) were more likely to feel that they had developed a tangible expertise in their fields. Most students observed that the IA program in many ways exemplified the best of the Liberal Arts model in its focus on connected understanding and critical thinking. There was a strong sense of being “shaky” in economics and feeling that micro and macro economics did not really contribute to an appreciation of global economic patterns. However, students who had taken the economics-oriented IA351 courses (“Illicit Markets” and “Faces and Phases of Global Capitalism”) felt much more confident about having a better understanding of international economics. A few students felt that they were definitely lacking in a strong historical perspective on world events, notably the impacts of colonialism, the Cold War and the Israel-Palestine Question.

Suggestions for Improving the Program

As in past years, students continued to have an insufficient sense of “belonging” to the IA major. Students therefore asked for more structured experiences as a cohort, as well as more formal opportunities to interact with IA seniors. Students also seemed to want systematic exposure to IA faculty early in the Program and suggested having an event where faculty talked about their research. Other suggestions included reviving an IA club, developing connections with IA seniors, getting together to discuss current affairs, watching relevant movies such as “Citizen 4” and “Garbage Dreams” etc. Students were uniformly enthusiastic about the 2015 Biannual IA Lecture by Ethan Watters and wished that there had been more shared opportunities to debrief the talk. And finally, some students asked for greater direction from professors in selecting their second major or minors.

It should be noted that some of the changes requested by students are likely to be addressed by our recent efforts to restructure the major by making it more focused and streamlined, and by adding a new Research Methods required course that would give students stronger preparation for the capstone project, while also providing them with another shared academic experience. These changes are currently under consideration by Curriculum Committee.

July 7, 2015

Dear Pushi and Aiwu,

Thanks very much for sending us your excellent assessment report for International Affairs for this year. Once again IA is in the forefront of gathering information from your students about their learning, with an eye to making improvements.

As before, we are responding to the department and program reports with particular attention to the ways faculty are framing goals for our students; analyzing student work directly (and also considering indirect information such as surveys and interviews) to see how well they are meeting our goals; discussing the results together; and making use of the results to change courses, requirements, and/or pedagogies. To meet the standards for accreditation, we are asked to analyze our students' work directly on a regular basis.

The key, as always, is to do assessment that you find meaningful. Everything lines up behind that. Your program has long been a leader in studying students' learning using a variety of measures, especially indirect measures, and making use of what you learn to develop your program.

Student Learning Goals: Established, and implicit in your report.

Assessments—Direct: None this year.

Assessments--Indirect: You report here on a survey given to your majors. It would be useful to include numbers (how many majors, response rate) and a note on the process. Many departments find it hard to get a good response rate on surveys. You might have tips that are useful for others. And of course, a small response rate affects the usefulness of the results and would be something you might address in the future. It sounds as though you got a decent number of responses here.

Results: Your report consists largely of a summary of the answers you received to a broad range of questions, laid out in such a way that they lead logically to your closing section on suggestions for change. Your results are hugely interesting, from the students' observations about advising, study abroad, workload in the bookend courses, and gaps in historical and economic knowledge, to their ongoing wish for greater community in the major. We note that your students complain a bit about workload, and we take this as a positive sign that they are being challenged. (In the English major, students were complaining so much about workload in our required core courses that we did a survey to find out how much time they were spending preparing for class. We were not surprised to find out that they were spending about 1.5 hours—just the right amount—so we did not decrease the readings and papers! But we did make an effort to emphasize the positive effects of the bootcamp model for the core courses.)

Within the context of these criticisms there is implicitly a robust, thriving major in which students are being challenged, working hard, and being transformed.

Discussion, implementation: No doubt the IA faculty will discuss this report as you all consider the changes mentioned in it.

We urge all departments and programs to discuss their assessments as a group with faculty, and in particular to consider whether the results lead you to draw conclusions about any ways to improve courses or pedagogies. We think that the IA faculty would do well to read and discuss your research in an intentional way.

Looking ahead: Your assessment work next year might well be the “closing the loop” part of the assessment cycle, as you consider adding a new course on research methods and perhaps other changes.

We hope that you will plan ahead for a direct, embedded assessment of some aspect of students’ learning, perhaps in the following year. For example, might faculty who teach advanced courses with an economic component agree on a rubric to assess seniors’ economic knowledge as demonstrated late in the course? This could give you a basis for deciding whether they are all acquiring those skills—and, if some are falling short, whether there are further programmatic changes you might want to make. Similarly, there may be a way you could assess their historical knowledge directly and decide whether that is a concern you would like to address in your major.

Overall: Excellent use of indirect assessment to obtain a comprehensive picture of student learning in your program. We look forward to hearing about the discussion of these results and your decision about research methods.

Thank you for this clear, useful, and insightful report!

Sincerely,

Sarah Goodwin
Lisa Christenson