**Inter-Disciplinary International Studies Program as Elite Programs:**

**Thoughts on Curriculum**

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How to develop an inter-disciplinary, global/international studies program at a small liberal arts public college? What should such a program contain as components for success? How to make sure it is truly inter-disciplinary but without losing a core list of courses? How to make sure this is not just political science/international relations pretending to be an inter-disciplinary international studies program? These are some of the questions I was faced with, when appointed as the coordinator of such an international studies program at a State University of New York (SUNY) comprehensive institution, SUNY Cortland. In this paper, I want to present a case study of a truly inter-disciplinary international studies program which has been growing over the last 30 years, since it was established, by making the major requirements more rigorous for the students. I am presenting this model as one that works for a university of our size, and it may inspire others, too. I will focus mostly on the curriculum of the program, rather than the program structure, administration, recruitment, and challenges.

One of the biggest curriculum-related problems ‘plaguing’ International Studies Programs (IST) is the dominance of political science as reported by Blanton (2009). Even though, I am a political scientist by training, I argue that this is a problem ‘plaguing’ international studies programs because quite often these programs are merely international relations programs with some foreign language requirements and maybe some diplomatic/political history rather than truly inter-disciplinary programs. The problems of the world require inter-disciplinary solutions and cannot be solved by one discipline or by one country alone. This may be one reason why International Studies programs have been growing across U.S. universities “both in terms of the number of institutions that offer them (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2004; Brown, Pegg, and Shively, 2006), as well as the size of the programs themselves (Blanton, 2009)” (Blanton and Breuning, 2016, 136).

Our International Studies Program at SUNY Cortland is truly inter-disciplinary with 5 inter-disciplinary courses as core requirements, 4 area concentrations and 6 thematic concentrations in which the students have to take 7 courses, and a foreign language requirement of 8 courses of foreign language. The core requirements are: The World Since 1500, Foundations of the Modern World, The Making of the Modern World, International Negotiation and Mediation, and a capstone course of Themes in International Studies. I will focus most of this working paper on these five courses. But, first a few words about the other requirements.

Each of the 10 IST concentrations emphasizes specific disciplines, while allowing students to take courses from 2-8 different disciplines. The ten concentrations are Africa, Europe, Latin America, Asia/Pacific, Global Political Systems, Global Economic Systems, Culture and Global Development, Historical Development, Geography, and International Health and Environment. For example, for the Europe concentration, students are asked to take courses from English Literature, Art and Art History, History, but also courses from Philosophy, Economics, and Political Science. For the Culture and Global Development concentration, courses from Anthropology and Sociology dominate, while for the International Health and Environment concentration, Health and Environmental Sciences courses are the most common.

The foreign language requirement of 8 courses of foreign language allows for a self-selection mechanism, turning the program into an elite major on our campus. This is the highest foreign language requirement amongst all 64 SUNY universities which have an International Studies major and provides significant help to the Modern Languages Department by keeping good enrollments for foreign languages[[1]](#footnote-1) at the advanced level, in addition to full classes at the beginners and intermediate level. The goal for this requirement is to make sure International Studies students are fluent in one foreign language, or proficient/intermediate in two foreign languages. In this respect, our IST program follows the pattern of most IST programs in U.S.[[2]](#footnote-2) What I am more interested in, is the fact that this requirement serves as a self-selection mechanism for attracting those students who are interested in international issues and are willing to work hard. The IST major at our institution has in-between 55-60 students enrolled, which places the program 18 out of 46 majors in Arts and Sciences and 36 out of 85 majors on campus for the 2017-2018 academic year in terms of student enrollment.

The foreign language requirement which attracts students who are willing to work harder than their peers, has been one of the reason why the IST program has become more academically rigorous and harder for students. There are three ways in which the IST program has become more rigorous over time: 1) moving away from textbooks to assigning the essential books and academic journal articles; 2) regular seminar discussion readings based on primary sources from history, anthropology, economy, and political science, and 3) the use of experiential and applied learning methods (role-play simulations and research methods application).

The fact that the previous coordinator of the International Studies Program is an archaeologist from the Anthropology department helps to make sure that the curriculum includes the essential anthropology books as part of the required readings. In addition, the significant involvement of a sociologist and a historian in the teaching of the core IST courses helps bring in the different perspectives of these disciplines, too. Finally, I, as the coordinator of the program, have made a conscious decision to integrate as part of the required readings non-American authors who may be less used in the American academia (e.g.: Fernand Braudel, Hannah Arendt, Eric Hobsbawm, Amin Maalouf, East Asian authors featured in Nader’s What the Rest Thinks of the West, Edward Said etc.). Students read approximately 120 pages per week for the core IST courses and have 5-7 required books, in addition to academic journals assigned for each of these courses. Moving away from the textbooks which ‘translate’ for the reader what the scholars say about specific phenomena, to using the actual original writings of the scholars, has been a welcomed change by both students and the faculty members. The students get to use this knowledge in other classes, too, which helps their performance in those classes. Faculty members teach in a more engaged way because they have to use books from historians, anthropologists, political scientists, but also from area specialists, rather than lowering their teaching ‘pitch’ in order to match the textbook.

Second, there are 8-9 weekly seminar discussion sessions set up during the 16 weeks for the courses. Students are assigned specific journal articles or book chapters on which they get to present as a group and then discuss the readings. This has been a major change in a) increasing the amount of scholarly exposure students get, and b) student engagement with the classroom. Not everyone is asked to read Fukuyama’s 1989 article, but those who were assigned Jowitt, 1991, can at least learn what Jowitt was criticizing in Fukuyama’s article, through the presentations of their peers who read Fukuyama. In the same time, students take ownership of their small group responsibility for the assigned readings, thus increasing their engagement with the material. In addition, students experience the foundations of the modern world through exposure to fiction, poetry, museum artifacts, and commodities used on a daily basis (tea, coffee, spices, sugar, fruits, clothes, porcelain etc.).

Third, a number of the International Studies core courses have incorporated role-play simulations on historical and current situations as well as basic, applied tools for research methods. One of the required courses is International Negotiation and Mediation during which students get to improve their negotiation and mediation skills in 5 role-play simulations in the classroom, but also with overseas partners as part of COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) classrooms. This course is very popular with the students, as they can apply these negotiation and mediation skills outside the classroom in their daily lives, too. On the other hand, other IST core courses have incorporated applied learning exercises, such as conducting interviews with foreign-born people in the local community, coding these interviews, and analyzing the data as a way to link the abstract concepts of international studies with the local community in which the students live in central NY. Such an applied research methods unit within a larger IST course requires a significant amount of preparation prior to the start of the course, to make sure it runs smoothly throughout the semester. Finally, students are asked to write research papers and they receive basic training on research methodologies and research paper writing (identifying research questions, developing hypothesis etc.).

In this paper I presented a case study of an International Studies Program which found its niche by promoting itself as an elite program in which students who are interested in the world and willing to work really hard self-select. We have found that students want this high level of academic rigor and thus, over the last few years, we have slowly increased the bar regarding readings and assignments in the core IST courses. Such a program gives students the ability to identify the important concepts and ideas from primary scholarly sources, to think critically about these concepts and ideas, to write research papers, to sharpen their negotiations and mediation skills, to work with primary data from interviews, to be fluent in a foreign language or intermediate in two foreign languages, and to connect their classroom experiences about the world, with the local community. Hopefully, this paper will inspire others to go against the stream of making classes easier and demanding less study time from students, and to promote their IST programs as elite, very rigorous programs, which can equip graduating students with the necessary tools to enter the job market as well-educated citizens.

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1. Chinese, French, German, Italian, and Spanish are the foreign language options at our university. But, we have had International Studies majors taking Russian, Arabic, Nepali, and Hindi at either neighboring universities, over the summer at other U.S. universities, or in multiple study abroad trips. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Blanton and Breuning, 2016 report that 80% of the 403 IST programs in U.S., including International Relations programs and those embedded in Political Science departments, require foreign language beyond other similar BA programs at those institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)