

Framing the International Studies Curriculum: Toward the Development of Common Student Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Unlike most disciplinary-based academic programs, interdisciplinary international studies programs vary considerably in terms of their core curricula. They need to fit within the institutional context in which they operate and must insure that there are sufficient faculty and resources available so that required courses are accessible on a regular basis and students can move through in a timely fashion. This paper suggests a framework for crafting core curricula in international studies. It advances a set of recommended student learning outcomes designed to accommodate the diversity of curricula that exist while providing a basis for developing common learning experiences.

Keywords: *international studies; interdisciplinary; curriculum; student learning outcomes*

Interdisciplinary international studies programs are marked by considerable variation in terms of their curricula (see Blanton, 2009; Breuning and Ishihara, 2004 and 2007; Brown, Pegg and Shively, 2006; Hey, 2004; Ishihara and Breuning, 2004; Shrivasta, 2008). This is due, in part, to the need to fit these programs to the institutional context within which they operate and to insure the availability of sufficient faculty across the campus to offer core courses. Often among the fastest growing majors, international studies must also respond to the pressures of accommodating expanding student populations by insuring that required courses are offered on a regular basis so that majors can move through the program in a timely manner.

This challenge raises questions as to what constitutes the actual core of the international studies major. While one could argue that there is certainly room for variability in the nature of the courses that are designated to meet major requirements, we appear to be at the point where there is a need for greater coherence and consistency across these programs in terms of explicit student learning outcomes (see Dolan, 2011). This paper will discuss some of the key issues impacting on the development of international studies core curricula and will offer a set of recommended student learning outcomes that would accommodate the diversity of these curricula while serving as the basis for a set of common learning experiences.

Core Curriculum Components

Despite the lack of a singular integrative framework, interdisciplinary international studies programs are coming to occupy an important role across many campuses – both in terms of the numbers of students they serve and the contributions they make to the broader

internationalization of those institutions. While it is difficult to know the exact number, recent data suggest that there are at least 174 international/global studies programs operating across the United States. This does not include those that might be subsumed within disciplinary departments such as political science or those designated as international relations (Peterson's, 2013). Students seem to be particularly attracted to their interdisciplinary character and the opportunity to pursue concentrated programs of study with an exclusively global dimension.

If these programs are to continue to attract student interest and to generate support from colleagues in disciplinary-based departments and administrators, however, they must be more than simply an amalgamation of disciplines that are addressing the same topic. They must establish their own identities and occupy a distinctive and unique niche that differentiates them from other majors. The development of appropriate and measurable learning outcomes is critical to this process and is necessary to further enhance the legitimacy of this emerging field. As has been suggested elsewhere, there are indeed a number of key elements that might effectively frame a core curriculum in international studies (Hobbs, Chernotsky and Van Tassell, 2010).

First, there is the need to foster an appreciation of the multiple perspectives that guide perceptions and interests across the world. Students must have an awareness of the diversity of cultures and the importance of communicating across cultures to promote cooperative solutions to conflicts that arise. They must also come to understand how these different perspectives help to account for the existence of an array of economic, political, and social forms of organization across the international system. Recognizing that a westernized view of the world is not universally shared, moreover, is critical to attaining a truly global perspective.

Second, students must come to view the world as an increasingly interconnected set of economic, political, cultural, and ecological systems and to understand the implications of the interdependencies of people living within these systems. This advances a 'state of the planet awareness' that is necessary to recognize the dynamics of common problems and predicaments (Hanvey, 1982). It also encourages a broader sense of the historical dimensions, current complexities, and future challenges confronting a progressively globalized world.

Third, it is imperative that students become familiar with the growing number of critical trans-sovereign issues that cross borders and cannot be solved by any one state acting alone (Cusimano-Love, 2007). Examples include terrorism, human rights, climate change, weapons of mass destruction, disease, economic development, trade and finance – to name a few. Efforts to address these issues are complicated by their highly contentious nature and the differing perspectives and interests of those who are affected. They may be appropriately explored in a regionally-specific context, but should also be considered in terms of their broader global implications.

Fourth, students must come to appreciate the importance of actual policy decisions in determining how these issues are addressed and the outcomes to the conflicts and crises that arise. They need to realize that most situations do not simply play themselves out randomly or haphazardly. Rather, they evolve through purposeful actions (or inactions) that affect the prospects for successful resolution. The difficulty of managing issues that cut across geographic,

political, economic, or cultural boundaries is compounded further by the fact that they impact differently across a range of local settings (for a full discussion of these elements, see Hobbs, Chernotsky and Van Tassell, 2010).

From Core Curriculum to Common Student Learning Outcomes

Given the broad and encompassing nature of these core principles, it would seem reasonable to expect fairly broad consensus with respect to their incorporation into the international studies curriculum. However, no single model appears to be on the horizon. Unlike disciplinary-based departments, where there is considerable uniformity in terms of basic courses and sub-fields represented, international studies curricula vary widely from campus to campus.

While most incorporate an introductory survey course, for example, these courses may be designed specifically to match the interdisciplinary structure of the program or might be taken from one of the disciplines whose courses service the major. Even then, the particular disciplinary-based course used to meet the requirement may differ. Diversity is also evident with respect to the tracks or concentrations offered and the nature of the capstone experience (Blanton, 2009). These disparities are due, in part, to the difficulties often encountered by international studies, as well as many other interdisciplinary programs, in terms of the availability and control over human and material resources.

While perhaps it is too strong to suggest that they are merely an afterthought, they often struggle to acquire their fair share - even when there may be strong verbal support expressed by college or university administrators. As a result, international studies programs tend to be rather idiosyncratic in terms of their structure and content and built to reflect the organizational and financial realities of particular institutions. Most are attached to existing academic departments or operate as stand-alone programs and are limited in their ability to recruit their own faculty or to independently maintain their own curricula. This accounts for the considerable differences in terms of types of courses offered, disciplines represented, numbers of faculty participating, and the overall breadth and depth of curricula.

The lack of consistency adds to the challenge of developing student learning outcomes that might be applicable across the range of international studies programs that have come into existence. The task is complicated further by the absence of any external accreditation body or set of uniform curriculum standards. The foundational student learning outcomes (SLOs) presented here are the product of a particular program and are certainly reflective of its unique structure. They flow from the idea that the borders that have traditionally defined the world, and our disciplinary-based approach to understanding it, are shifting. The ways these borders are being crossed, moreover, serve as a useful guide in determining the courses that might frame the development of a core international studies curriculum (Chernotsky and Hobbs, 2013). These particular SLOs may be adjusted or adapted to fit a variety of settings and are intended to open discussion about the feasibility of generating common student learning outcomes across a range of international studies programs.

Some background information might be useful. International studies at UNC Charlotte began in 2000 as a stand-alone interdisciplinary major within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The appointed director received a modest stipend to develop the program and teach its two dedicated courses (an introductory survey and a capstone research-based seminar), in addition to discharging all other responsibilities within his home department. Secretarial support was limited and a very modest operating budget was allocated, primarily for the preparation of program and marketing materials. At least initially, all other courses used to satisfy curriculum requirements were from other academic departments within the college (and the business school that housed the department of economics).

Despite these constraints, a highly structured and relatively expansive curriculum was put in place. A total of ten courses comprised the major. In addition, students were required to demonstrate foreign language competency that was the equivalent of three full years of formal study and to complete an international experience related to their area of concentration. For most, this involved participation in a formal study abroad program. The actual number of courses taken to fulfill these related work requirements varied in accordance with a student's particular background and prior experience.

The required introductory survey course was designed to acquaint students with the multi-dimensional character of the global system and to familiarize them with some of the more significant issues and challenges arising from globalization and its differential impacts. It also emphasized the need to address standard definitions and conceptions of citizenship in an increasingly globalized world. Recognizing the need to pursue these general themes more thoroughly, a set of 'advanced core' requirements was incorporated into the curriculum. Students were required to take an upper division class in each of three designated subject areas economic, geo-political, and social-cultural awareness. The courses that were made available were ones that offered broad, global perspectives and were not confined exclusively to any one particular region of the world.

More focused and in-depth study was to be provided by the courses used to pursue the concentrations within the major. Initially, these concentrations were exclusively regional (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America). A 'comparative' option was soon made available to accommodate those with interests in an issue or theme that extended beyond a particular region. Each student declared a concentration as close to entering the program as possible to facilitate the selection of an appropriate foreign language and planning for the international experience. Each concentration included an historical survey course and four additional electives.

As students neared the end of their programs of study, they were cleared to enroll in the capstone seminar. This course provided for the completion of research papers focused on topics related to their respective concentrations. It included a considerable amount of one-on-one contact with the instructor, who guided each student through the rather rigorous process of moving from hypothesis or thesis statement through the multiple drafts that would result in the final product. Formal presentations of the completed papers were also required.

The specifics relating to the evolution of the program need not be recounted here. They are likely familiar to many in the field. Suffice to say, the program exploded in terms of student interest and within a few short years it was virtually impossible to satisfy student demand. While additional resources were forthcoming, they did not come close to providing the kind of support required to keep up with the rate of growth. In accordance with university policies, international studies was required to formulate a set of student learning outcomes. The outcomes generated were designed to apply to all students enrolled – regardless of their designated concentrations. They reflected both the *knowledge* and *skills* that students were expected to acquire as they moved through the program, including the international experience. Foreign language proficiency was also accounted for, although simply through verifying the completion of the requirement. The assessments of those courses fell within the purview of their home department.

While the learning outcomes themselves were deemed both appropriate and reasonable by the college’s administrative oversight team, a significant problem surfaced with respect to the ability to demonstrate that these outcomes were actually occurring. This was due, in large measure, to an issue that is common to many international studies programs – the need to ‘outsource’ some core courses to other departments whose learning outcomes and methods for evaluating success in meeting them are unique to their respective curricula. While difficult to address, this did move us to consider how we might devise a strategy that would maximize the use of our own curriculum tools and enable us to meet the standard for *measurable and assessable outcomes*.

This process took some time and went through a number of iterations. Meanwhile, some important developments helped move this effort forward. The continuing growth of the program, coupled with a series of issues affecting a number of the college’s other interdisciplinary curricula, resulted in the elevation of international studies to departmental status. Although coinciding with the downturn of the state’s economy and the reduction of expenditures for higher education, this did result in some additional resources that permitted the hiring of the program’s first tenure-track faculty and the development of new courses to service the core curriculum. The university was also preparing for its periodic accreditation review by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and initiated a series of meetings and workshops to enhance its assessment processes and procedures. These initiatives proved most helpful in moving the outcomes/assessment effort forward. Over the past few years, moreover, the continued expansion in the number of faculty and courses has enhanced the department’s ability to control its curriculum and to align it more closely to the desired learning outcomes.

The outcomes themselves were not particularly difficult to generate, as they were designed to closely mirror the underlying structure of the program. They included:

SLO 1: Students will have an understanding of the “knowledge” relating to International Studies, including:

- a. the interdependence and globalization of world systems
- b. the operation of the international economy

- c. world geo-political conditions and developments
- d. the diversity of cultures, ideas, and practices across the world

SLO 2: Students will have in-depth knowledge of a particular world region, country or issue.

SLO 3: Students will demonstrate the ability to complete a comprehensive research paper related to the area of concentrated study and to communicate the research effectively in an oral presentation.

Beyond the articulation of the outcomes was the need to tie them directly to the mechanisms available within the curriculum to assess them. To a large degree, this involved the required capstone seminar research paper. While students were writing these papers (and preparing oral presentations) on specialized topics related to their respective concentrations, they were expected to contextualize them within the broader themes covered across the international studies curriculum. This was captured in SLO 1, as shown in the Table 1 below that measured the ways in which the papers went beyond their particular subjects and addressed the multi-disciplinary and global elements incorporated within the ‘advanced core’ requirements of the major .

Table 1

Student Learning Outcome 1

Students will have an understanding of the “knowledge” relating to International Studies, including:

- a. the interdependence and globalization of world systems*
- b. the operation of the international economy*
- c. world geo-political conditions and developments*
- d. the diversity of cultures, ideas, and practices across the world*

Effectiveness Measure: Senior Seminar research paper.

Rubric: Interdisciplinary and Interdependence Knowledge framework and analysis (multi-disciplinary approach; impact of global factors; theoretical/analytical framework; critical thinking).

Methodology: Committee assesses sample of papers on each element and provides overall rating of *Outstanding, Acceptable, or Unacceptable*. Department reviews findings to determine programmatic changes necessary to improve performance.

Performance Outcome: 80% of students assessed will score *Acceptable or above* on the Interdisciplinary and Interdependence Knowledge dimension.

The deeper and more focused understandings that students were expected to convey in these papers were appraised in SLO 2, as shown in the Table 2 below. Reflective essays relating to the international experience also played a role here and provided data to evaluate the utility of this direct, personal engagement.

Table 2

Student Learning Outcome 2

Students will have in-depth knowledge of a particular world region, country or issue.

Effectiveness Measure 1: International Experience reflection paper.

Rubric: Demonstrates understanding of the challenges of globalization gained directly from international experience.

Effectiveness Measure 2: Senior Seminar research paper.

Rubric: Region/Country/Issue Research & Analysis Skills (situates within broader international context; connects theory to evidence; quality and use of resources).

Methodology: Committee assesses sample of international experience essays and provides overall rating of *Outstanding, Acceptable, or Unacceptable*. Committee assesses sample of Seminar research papers on each element and provides overall rating of *Outstanding, Acceptable, or Unacceptable*. Department reviews findings to determine programmatic changes necessary to improve performance.

Performance Outcome: 90% of students will score *Acceptable or above* on the International Experience learning dimension. 90% of students assessed will score *acceptable or above* on the Region/Country/Issue Research and Analysis Skills dimension.

Finally, the university-wide mandate to assess communication skills across all curricula was reflected in SLO 3, as shown in the Table 3 below, that zeroed in on the mechanics of the seminar papers and the quality of the presentations.

Table 3

Student Learning Outcome 3

Students will demonstrate the ability to complete a comprehensive research paper related to the area of concentrated study and to communicate the research effectively in an oral presentation.

Effectiveness Measure 1: Senior Seminar research paper.

Rubric: Writing Skills (research statement; hypothesis; analysis; conclusion; quality of presentation style and structure).

Effectiveness Measure 2: Oral Presentation of Senior Seminar research paper.

Rubric: Oral Communication Skills (organization; content; presentation quality and style).

Methodology: Committee assesses sample of papers on each element and provides overall rating of *Outstanding*, *Acceptable*, or *Unacceptable*. Senior Seminar instructors assess oral presentations on each element and provide overall rating of *Outstanding*, *Acceptable*, or *Unacceptable*. Department reviews findings to determine programmatic changes necessary to improve performance.

Performance Outcome: 80% of students assessed will score *Acceptable or above* on the Writing Skills dimension. 80% of students assessed will score *Acceptable or above* on the Oral Communication Skills dimension.

While framed in somewhat expansive terms so as to match the broad parameters of the curriculum, the learning outcomes incorporated ways of measuring performance in meeting both the common (core courses) and individualized (area or topical concentrations) components of the program and focused on both the knowledge and skills that we wished our students to acquire.

Conclusion

As this paper has suggested, the development of a uniform set of student learning outcomes for interdisciplinary international studies programs is a rather complex challenge. Not only does there still seem to be a lack of general consensus as to what appropriately constitutes the core curriculum but the programs themselves are a diverse lot, given their need to adapt to the particular culture and resource realities present on their respective campuses.

At the same time, it is necessary to move forward with this effort if international studies is to be effective in maintaining and expanding its already considerable niche within the academic community. The discussion here seeks to contribute to this enterprise by offering a broad set of assessable student learning outcomes that might frame an international studies curriculum and that may be adapted to fit more closely with its particular tracks or concentrations.

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