

Assessment Project: Final Report
International Studies Major
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Submitted by Deborah Avant

The assessment exercise generated a clear statement of learning objectives in the international studies major. These are:

1. Know the general history and geography/sociology of the international system.
2. Know the basic contours of contemporary political and social issues.
3. Know a foreign language.
4. Have deep knowledge of at least one geographic area and one issue area
5. Be able to analyze and parse social problems.
6. Be able to write clearly and persuasively.

As much as possible we have tried to integrate assessment of these learning objectives into the structure of the curriculum.

For goals 1-4, there is a fairly clear relationship between these goals and student performance in particular courses. Students are required to take an introductory sequence that covers the history of the international system and the basic contours of contemporary global political and social issues. They are also required to take two years of a foreign language (or a test demonstrating their knowledge of one). Finally, students must select a regional and issue area specialization within the major – which leads them to take at least four classes relating to a region and a particular issue. Grades in these classes give us insight into how well individual students have mastered these objectives. In all of these, grades of “B” or higher in the class are good demonstrations that students are achieving what we would like them to. A “C” is adequate, but not good, and below that is problematic.

Learning objectives 5 and 6 are also incorporated into the curriculum given that much of the curriculum is based in the social sciences and humanities where analysis and writing are fundamental parts of most classes. How to assess these more general attributes outside of a classroom grade, alone, however, is one key challenge for us.

Assessment project:

The project we undertook was designed to address this challenge. We proposed to:

- 1) Review the assessment processes of peer international studies programs for ideas;
- 2) Examine whether or not the papers students write for the International Studies Public Forum class might serve as a useful point of comparison from which we could evaluate how participation in the major advanced skills in writing and analysis.

This course is taken at key moments in a student’s undergraduate career. Students are required to take it twice – ideally once when they first declare the major as a freshman or sophomore and once in their senior year. The early experience should

provide a snapshot of the skills the student enters with and the latter a snapshot of what he or she leaves with.

Results of the assessment project:

- 1) We found little on assessment at our peer institutions.
- 2) We have moved ahead with our idea about the ISPF papers. We have collected 38 freshmen/sophomore papers and 190 senior papers this year.
- 3) Our intention was to conduct a trial analysis to see if there were significant differences in the writing/analysis skills (use of analytical categories, persuasiveness of argument, use of evidence, consideration of alternative viewpoints, demonstrated knowledge, and attention to detail) between freshmen/sophomores and seniors in general during the summer of 2010. We were in contact with Nathalie Schonfeld, the university's writing coordinator to help us draw up a tool for analyzing the papers but lack of time and resources prevented us from moving forward on that thus far. We hope to do more on that during the 2010-2011 academic year.
- 4) We will also follow the 38 lower class students to their senior year to track individual students and we will begin tracking a sample of lower class students in the ISPFs during 2010-2011 academic year. Tracking individual students may prove a better and more manageable assessment tool.

Reflections on the assessment project:

Our review of assessment programs at other institutions suggested that assessment is problematic at many institutions. We found few examples of developed assessment plans. Still there is a good deal of evidence that International Studies Majors have grown and are seen as successful in many respects. The most successful schools seem to have high levels of faculty engagement rather than well developed assessment tools. We believe this level of engagement is the key to the natural adjustment of courses we referenced above and is also important for innovations in the curriculum – even though it is hard to measure and count.

We are committed to maintaining and increasing this faculty engagement. Our efforts on the International Studies Public Forum (which brings faculty and students together to hear important new research and thinking on global issues) are designed to do just this. We decided we should add this to our assessment. We will include the number of students exposed to the ISPF (counted by number of majors and non-majors enrolled) as part of our assessment.

How to compile, publicize and follow through on assessment results:

As we move forward, we also need to think through the following issues. How often should we compile information about student performance in key courses and how many students should we track? Should we also look at student evaluations of the courses? In general most of us feel there is a natural feedback from assessment to changes in individual classes. When students do not perform well, most faculty members adjust.

But how to compile assessments and compare across time on the basis of classroom performance at an aggregate level (which is in any way meaningful) is complicated.

The assessment on the basis of writing samples provides a more useful aggregate tool for assessing the major but how we should use that to feed back into improvement is less clear. What do we do if we do not see the improvement we expect? Perhaps we could encourage more writing/analysis in IS classes. How to do that without resources to encourage faculty – especially in the current budgetary environment – is unclear.

Should we do more to assess not just our learning objectives but how these matter for students' futures? Perhaps by tracking where students go and how successful they are after graduation?

We are interested in receiving feedback on these issues.

Most importantly, it will be impossible to move forward on collecting and analyzing data relevant to IS assessment without resources to conduct these assessments on an ongoing basis. IS is UCI's 8th largest major (over 800 students) and it is run by one person with one program manager who also is program manager for a research center. Both are working at maximum capacity at present. Though IS has affiliated faculty, all are also faculty in other departments where they have administrative work already so our capacity to tap these faculty (particularly if we have nothing to give them) is limited. If the university is serious about continuing these exercises in assessment, it needs to provide resources to accomplish them or decide what jobs they replace (perhaps a one course teaching reduction for a faculty member to conduct assessment each year?).

General Conclusions:

Though our review of other programs yielded little concrete assessment plans, it did give us ideas – such as counting the students taking ISPFs as a measure of engagement.

We have come up with a viable plan to move toward an assessment process in IS. Our greatest barrier right now is resources. Collecting the data on students and analyzing it, particularly, analyzing a selection of ISPF papers requires more time than is available given the faculty and staff resources in IS.

Given additional resources – such as one course release for one IS faculty member each year – we will continue to develop the plan and put it in place. Short of that, we will work with the Social Science Counseling Office to track the students' accomplishment of learning objectives 1-4 via enrollment and performance in courses (even this will place a significant burden on a very overworked staff).