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

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

Interdisciplinary International Studies programs are marked by considerable variation in terms of their curricula.¹ 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 disparity 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. 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.

Despite the lack of a singular integrative framework, interdisciplinary International Studies programs are coming to occupy an important role across many campuses. If they 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

¹ See Blanton (2009); Breuning and Ishihara (2004 and 2007); Brown, Scott and Shively (2006); Hey (2004); Ishihara and Breuning (2004); Shrivasta (2008).

occupy a distinctive and unique niche that differentiates them from other majors. The development of appropriate and measuring learning outcomes is critical to this process and is necessary to further enhance the legitimacy of this emerging field. So what are the key elements that might effectively frame a core curriculum in International Studies?

Core Curriculum Components²

First, there is the need to foster an appreciation of the multiple perspectives guiding perceptions and interests across the world. Students must have an awareness of the diversity of cultures and the importance of cross-cultural communication in promoting cooperation and in resolving conflicts that arise. They must also come to appreciate how these different perspectives help account for the existence of a wide array of social, political, and economic 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, there is the need to convey a view of the world as an increasingly interconnected set of political, economic, cultural, and ecological systems and the interdependence of people living within these systems. Such a realization advances what Hanvey (1982) has referred to as a ‘state of the planet awareness’ that promotes this global perspective and recognizes the implications of common challenges and problems. It also fosters a greater appreciation of the historical dimensions, multiple facets, and differential responses of a globalized world.

Third, it is essential for students to gain familiarity with the growing number of critical issues and controversies that impact on relationships across those systems. These are what Cusimano-Love (2007) calls trans-sovereign issues, in that they transcend traditional state jurisdictions and cannot be solved by one state acting alone. Examples include terrorism, human rights, climate change, weapons of mass destruction, disease, economic development, trade and

² The framework for discussion in this section comes from Hobbs, Chernotsky and VanTassell (2010)

finance – to name a few. They often involve a significant degree of conflict and have developed over a considerable period of time. While these issues might be explored in either global or area-specific contexts, they should be viewed in both historical and contemporary dimensions.

Fourth, students must come to appreciate the impact of choices in shaping the future direction of those systems and realize that outcomes across the global system are not necessarily predetermined. This includes an understanding that there are alternative paths to managing relationships and resolving conflicts and there is the need to account for a range and diversity of perspectives when confronting policy decisions. An appreciation of local-global connections when addressing issues that cut across geo-political, economic or cultural boundaries is also critical in this regard.

From Core Curriculum to Common Student Learning Outcomes

Given the broad and encompassing nature of these elements, it would seem reasonable to expect fairly broad consensus with respect to the incorporation of these core principles into the International Studies curriculum. At the same time, however, no single model for implementation is on the horizon. Unlike disciplinary-based departments, where there is considerably uniformity in terms of basic courses and sub-fields represented, International Studies curricula vary widely from campus to campus. This is due, in part, to the difficulties often encountered by most interdisciplinary programs in terms of the availability and control over human and material resources. While perhaps 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. Hence, the

considerable diversity in terms of courses offered, tracks or concentrations available, disciplines represented and types of faculty participating.

The challenge of developing student learning outcomes that might be applicable across the range of International Studies programs that have been established flows from this reality. The task is complicated further by the absence of any external accreditation body or set of standards, such as those governing professional degree programs, that might serve as a common frame for guiding the development of curricula. To be sure, the foundational student learning outcomes recommended here are the product of a particular program offered at a particular university and are certainly reflective of its unique structure. Thus, they are offered here as a means for opening discussion about the feasibility of generating common learning outcomes for our programs. They include:

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

- a. Understanding of the interdependence and globalization of world systems
- b. Understanding of the operation of the international economy
- c. Understanding of world geo-political conditions and developments
- d. Understanding of 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.

Some background information might be useful. International Studies at UNC Charlotte began in 2000 as a stand-alone interdisciplinary major (and minor) 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, 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).

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 fitted directly to the composition of the curriculum and its requirements and were designed to apply to all students enrolled – regardless of their designated concentrations. They reflected both the *knowledge* and *skills* that we hoped students would acquire as they moved through the program.

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 our 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 dynamics affecting some 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 some faculty and the development of new courses to service the core curriculum. The university was also preparing for its periodic accreditation review by 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 our outcomes/assessment effort forward.

What became more abundantly clear was the need to tie our articulated student learning outcomes directly to the mechanisms available within the curriculum to assess them (**See TABLES 1-3**). In large measure, this involved the Senior Seminar research paper that is requirement for all majors. While students write these papers (and prepare oral presentations) on topics related to their respective concentrations, they are expected to contextualize them within the broader themes covered across the International Studies curriculum. Reflection papers relating to the required international experience also play a role. Although somewhat counter-intuitive, particularly in light of the fact that International Studies is a rather rigorous program, our student learning outcomes were actually reduced in number as a result of our recent manipulations to fit better with established standards. Still, they incorporate ways of measuring performance in meeting both the common (core courses) and individualized (area or topical concentrations) components of the curriculum and retain their focus on both the knowledge and skills that we wish 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. 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 discussion 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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TABLE 1: STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOME 1

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

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

Effectiveness Measure:

Research Paper Completed in INTL 4601 Senior Seminar. The Senior Seminar research paper will be evaluated on the basis of the following Interdisciplinary and Interdependence Knowledge Rubric criteria: identification of multi-disciplinary factors, analysis of global interdependence, clear theoretical/analytical framework, and critical thinking.

Methodology:

The sample of papers is reviewed by the departmental committee each spring once all papers for INTL 4601 have been submitted. The reviewers rate each of the criteria included for evaluation as “Outstanding,” “Acceptable,” or “Unacceptable” and an overall rating of the “knowledge” dimension is derived from each sampled paper. The assessments are submitted to the department chair, who compiles and reviews the data with reference to the performance outcome target. The chair reviews these findings with the departmental faculty at the next scheduled department meeting to determine if any programmatic changes are necessary to improve performance.

Performance Outcome:

80% of students assessed will achieve a score of “Acceptable” or higher on the Interdisciplinary and Interdependence Knowledge Rubric evaluation criteria.

TABLE 2: STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOME 2

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

Effectiveness Measure:

Reflection Paper on the International Experience Requirement. Students enrolled in INTL 4601 write brief essay in which they discuss one insight that demonstrates their understanding of the challenges of globalization that has been gained directly as a result of fulfilling the international experience requirement. A sample of essays is reviewed by a committee of departmental faculty.

Research Paper completed in INTL 4601 Senior Seminar. The Senior Seminar research paper will be evaluated on the basis of the following Region/Country/Issue Research & Analysis Skill Rubric criteria: situates region/country/issue within a broader international context, quality and use of resources, and attempts to connect theory to evidence.

Methodology:

The sample of essays relating to the international experience is reviewed each spring by the departmental committee once INTL 4601 has been completed. The reviewers rate the criteria included for evaluation as “Outstanding,” “Acceptable,” or “Unacceptable” to measure the overall effectiveness of the international experience.

The sample of papers is reviewed by the departmental committee each spring once all papers for INTL 4601 have been submitted. The reviewers rate each of the criteria included for evaluation as “Outstanding,” “Acceptable,” or “Unacceptable” and an overall rating of the “world region/country” dimension is derived from each sampled paper. The assessments are submitted to the department chair, who compiles and reviews the data with reference to the performance outcome target. The chair reviews these findings with the departmental faculty at the next scheduled department meeting to determine if any programmatic changes are necessary to improve performance.

Performance Outcome:

90% of students will score “acceptable” or above on the International Experience Rubric evaluation criteria.

90% of students assessed will score “acceptable” or above on the Region/Country/Issue Research and Analysis Skills Rubric evaluation criteria.

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:

Research Paper Completed in INTL 4601 Senior Seminar. The Senior Seminar research paper related to the area of concentrated study will be evaluated on the basis of the following Writing Skills Rubric criteria: thesis statement; analysis; conclusion; and style, spelling, and grammar.

Oral Presentation of INTL 4601 Senior Seminar Research Paper: The oral presentation will be evaluated on the basis of the following Oral Communication Skills Rubric criteria: organization, content, quality of conclusion, voice quality and pace, mannerisms, and use of media.

Methodology:

The sample of papers is reviewed by the departmental committee each spring once all papers for INTL 4601 have been submitted. The reviewers rate each of the criteria included for evaluation as “Outstanding,” “Acceptable,” or “Unacceptable” and an overall rating of the “skills” dimension is derived from each sampled paper. The assessments are submitted to the department chair, who compiles and reviews the data with reference to the performance outcome target. The chair reviews these findings with the departmental faculty at the next scheduled department meeting to determine if any programmatic changes are necessary to improve performance.

Oral presentations are assessed at time of delivery by INTL 4601 faculty. The presentations are rated for each of the criteria included for evaluation as “Outstanding,” “Acceptable,” or “Unacceptable” and an overall rating is assigned to each presentation.

Performance Outcome:

80% of students assessed will score “acceptable” or above on the Writing Skills Rubric evaluation criteria.

80% of students assessed will score “acceptable” or above on the Oral Communication Skills Rubric evaluation criteria.