

International Studies Program Review
Oakland University
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This external report reflects on Oakland University's Decennial Program Review and the related Ten Year Self-Study Report provided by International Studies Program (ISP) director Paul Kubicek. I will speak to the main points noted by the director and place his observations in the wider context of international and interdisciplinary programs in American higher education. I will conclude with some recommendations for where the program might go from here.

Overview

I will begin with an observation that Professor Kubicek makes at several points in the review. International studies programs face challenges in higher education. Many of these programs have their origins in the Cold War, and were often initiated and/or supported by grants from the US government—most notably, Title VI funding. Even in those cases where such government support was not forthcoming, numerous institutions sought to build programs that would deepen foreign language and area studies training, often with a greater emphasis on particular parts of the world where existing faculty brought specialization (typically Europe, Asia and Latin America).

While many of these programs originate in, or borrow from, the institutional norms created by Carnegie ranked R1 research institutions and their area studies programs, other elements have shaped their path. Resistance to disciplinary boundaries in the 1970s helped push through an additional wave of international programs, focused less on specific area studies in place of a more normative focus on topics that were viewed as underserved in traditional departments like political science (such as development, poverty, and international aid). Finally, the “end of history” at the end of the Cold War led to some new international programs focused more on globalization and trade. Overlapping with this were changes in core requirements at many universities that included an “international” component for the first time. It is my understanding that Oakland was an early adopter of such changes, and the international requirements in the core can be seen in various universities across the country.¹

Whatever the time period or impetus, however, such programs face pressure at universities across the board. One concern is that American students are increasingly disinterested in studying foreign languages. Research from the Modern Language Association has found that colleges have lost over 650 foreign language programs between 2013 to 2016. Much of this is

¹ “New Office Facilitates Study Abroad Programs,” Oakland University News Archive
<https://our.oakland.edu/bitstream/handle/10323/8487/20030714-New-office-facilitates-study-abroad-programs.pdf?sequence=1>

attributed to reduced student interest and the removal of foreign language requirements at colleges, though it is difficult to say how much the latter affects the former. Even for international studies programs with more of a business and political economic focus, enrollments face headwinds as students turn on globalization and political fights question the validity, or ability, to “know” other cultures. As a final point, the role these programs have played in general education requirements is also challenged by attempts to fold “the international” into broader frameworks of power and justice. These may open the space for new lines of inquiry but also run the risk of weakening our understanding of the outside world.

The question, then, is how do we continue to make and keep international studies programs vital and useful on college campuses? And to what extent is Oakland’s ISP meeting its goals and potential?

Oakland ISP Program Structure: Assets and Challenges

In the absence of historical background I cannot speak to the origins of the program. However, given that it is rooted in language and area studies, rather than the social science or humanities, I can only assume that it exists as an initiative hailing from that direction. Similar kinds of “foreign language and area studies” programs can be found at various universities, and often are the initiative of language professors and allied area specialists who sought to provide a wider grounding for students learning a language. As the report notes, however, this generates two problems. First, providing related learning around a language is dependent on faculty in other departments, as the ISP lacks its own faculty. This is not necessarily a problem; international studies programs that replicate faculty lines rather than drawing on the resources across campus is a recipe for a turf war. However, it also means that Oakland’s ISP, while reasonably confident what languages will be taught, can be less certain that related subjects will be available from participating departments. The example of Japanese majors, who have been the largest concentration over the past decade, unable to take courses with significant focus on Japan, is telling. The use of “complementary” areas for coursework attempts to address this problem primarily through providing the requisite units, as opposed to regional coherence. Professor Kubicek notes that this is a problem.

A related challenge for ISP is that there has emerged an adjacent program in International Relations from the Political Science Department. This program also contains a foreign language component, and emphasizes that it is multidisciplinary—essentially serving much of the same function as the ISP. In retrospect it would have made sense to integrate the work of the Political Science Department with that of the ISP, but as is noted in Professor Kubicek’s report, there was resistance on the part of past ISP leadership to widening the focus of the program.

It is hard to take issue with Professor Kubicek’s observation that the ISP majors are, to use his words, “moribund.” As a result, the organizational contribution that the ISP is making on campus is primarily in their contribution to GEGP courses. Here, too, the degree of contribution has declined even more dramatically, such that the number of students who take an ISP course as part of their GEGP requirement has dropped by half. In as much as these courses have served

as a “gateway” to the ISP, this only further lowers the profile of the program. In the end, the program lacks the kind of core identity and organizational distinctness that can attract students. Students are likely unclear what the ISP is “for,” and why their needs can’t be better served in another program. As a result, attempts at raising the profile of the program, as noted by the director, are unlikely to yield much fruit.

Next Steps

Professor Kubicek is to be commended for his clear-eyed view of the current limitations of the ISP, notably the way in which it is hemmed in by similar programs and dependent on the faculty and course offerings in allied departments. Understanding these challenges, are there any opportunities to redirect the program?

One option might be to re-think the ISP major as a dual degree program. These are common and growing, typically structured around 4+1 programs that add a master’s degree on to an existing undergraduate one (at Oakland, the example is the Wellness and Health Promotion/ MPH). However, an alternative option that remains within undergraduate education would promote international studies and an area focus, while married to a primary undergraduate degree outside of ISP. To give an example, my home university has an Environmental Policy and Decision Making (EPDM) degree. Students cannot major in EPDM alone, and the department itself has limited faculty, relying in large part on courses from outside the department. Moreover, in order to pursue EPDM, students must first choose a primary major that is meant to align with the student’s particular interests.² Thus, a student might be an economics or biology first major, with EPDM as their secondary degree.

In a similar manner, the ISP degree at Oakland might be recast as a secondary major, where students identify both their area of regional interest and their educational focus, and take a set of courses that meet those needs. A student with interest in Asian art history will have a very different focus than one focused on Chinese economic development, and the courses needed for the secondary major could be approved by the advisor/department head on a contract basis. Given the small number of majors this would not be onerous. Students with ISP as a secondary degree would benefit from tighter cohesion in their “home” major, and a set of tailored course offerings based on their regional and intellectual interests. None of this would require substantial shifts in organization or staffing in ISP, nor lead to conflicts with other programs such as International Relations. Finally, it would continue to preserve and respect the role of area studies and language acquisition, a field of study that remains vital in spite of current student interests and changes in universities’ budgetary and organizational landscape.

Another related innovation could be to offer a Peace Corps Prep Certificate, if this is not already being offered on campus. The Peace Corps Prep Certificate combines language and thematic

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<https://www.pugetsound.edu/academics/environmental-policy-decision-making/degree-requirements-environmental-policy-decision>

coursework, and might attract interest in the ISP by orienting the program toward area studies with a focus on service.³ In short, thinking about the complementary ways that the ISP program can serve the interests of students that are not being fully met by individual programs is perhaps the most valuable way to shepherd the program through this decade.

³ <https://www.peacecorps.gov/volunteer/university-programs/peace-corps-prep/>