

The International Affairs Program: Values-Driven Interdisciplinary Teaching and Organization

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Overview

The International Affairs Program (IAFS) is an interdisciplinary undergraduate program and one of the largest majors on campus. We are housed in the Division of Social Sciences within the College of Arts and Sciences. Five of our teaching faculty hold joint appointments with IAFS and their tenure home departments in the Social Sciences or Humanities. Other faculty who teach courses on the IAFS curriculum, including members of the IAFS Committee, hold appointments in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences, and in the College of Music.

This white paper focuses on the interdisciplinary approach that works for IAFS. There is no one paradigm of how to be interdisciplinary. The College of Arts and Sciences, for example, is home to a number of successful interdisciplinary units, including Ethnic Studies, International Affairs, and Women and Gender Studies. Each unit has developed its own model of interdisciplinarity in order to meet its unique teaching, research, and service needs. We believe our program can provide one useful model, and we hope the Academic Futures Committee will keep it in mind as it develops a vision of interdisciplinary teaching. That said, interdisciplinary structures and approaches must be tailored to meet the aspirations and requirements of particular units.

Goals

IAFS facilitates cross-disciplinary and cross-divisional education. With our unique organizational structure and our commitment to undergraduate learning, we strive to be a model for how interdisciplinary organizations can work. Critical to our success are our cooperative relationships with cognate departments and programs: building pathways to collaborate with other units is fundamental to our teaching mission.

Intellectual Goals

IAFS seeks to foster intellectual community, primarily among students and also among faculty. We are eager to build on our existing system, which creates opportunities for interdisciplinary work and equips students with the skills they need to seize those opportunities.

Organizational Goals

The program's faculty, both teaching faculty with IAFS appointments and faculty in other departments who sit on the IAFS Committee, range across disciplines, divisions, and colleges. We seek a flexible organizational structure that allows us to continue to make wide-ranging joint appointments.

IAFS Interdisciplinary Model

IAFS is an extremely successful undergraduate teaching program. Our curriculum explicitly integrates experiential learning. Over half our majors study abroad, the largest number on campus. We have a thriving Latin honors program, one of the largest in the College of Arts and Sciences. All our majors graduate with advanced skills in at least one other language. Overall, our major is designed to educate students on relevant global issues and theories, and to position students to engage with the world as informed global citizens.

We accomplish all this despite being one of the most rigorous majors on campus. Our curriculum is complex and demanding, and the major requires 51 credits plus third-year language proficiency. Students must complete coursework across four functional areas: Development and Culture; International Economics, Business, and Political Economy; Political Geography, International Security, and Foreign Policy; and Institutions, Rights, and Norms. Our major also requires an area studies concentration, allowing students to specialize in a geographic region of the world. Our organizational structure flows from this interdisciplinary curriculum.

In practical terms, this means that IAFS is interdisciplinary in terms of teaching, research (both faculty and student research), and organization. This is a crucial point: **the values-driven interdisciplinary work we've done so successfully in IAFS cannot be reduced to a simple organizational structure.** Rather, it requires a flexible and responsive organization to deal with complexity.

Fundamentals of Interdisciplinarity

Our interdisciplinary reach extends beyond the social sciences (our home division). **Pathways between the arts and humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences** are central to our students' learning. **Genuinely invested governance** is also key. A **flexible administrative structure** allows us to get things done creatively and efficiently. Our **specialized staff** have experience and training in interdisciplinary environments. Our **commitment to the International Affairs community** informs our decisions and actions.

Values-driven Interdisciplinary Work

Our values are fundamental to our work and derive from our undergraduate teaching mission. IAFS is a student-centered program and we prioritize excellence in undergraduate education. Our faculty and staff are committed to and engaged with this mission. We also value our role as good citizens in the College and on campus. The strong relationships that we build make tangible contributions to student success.

Relationship-building

Our work requires daily cooperation with other departments, programs, and offices. Excellent relationships allow us to deliver an excellent program. In short, it requires diplomacy to work across disciplinary boundaries.

Working with a complicated curriculum that draws upon multiple disciplines also requires our faculty and staff to exercise judgment on a daily basis. Our joint hires must balance their obligations in their tenure homes with their commitments to IAFS. Our staff need to use their discretion to build relationships to fulfill program and curriculum goals. IAFS staff members work more independently than staff in many units because our faculty are far-flung, in different units, divisions, and even colleges.

Culture

Our culture is a key to our success. Once again, our culture stems from our values as a student-centered program. We are a high-functioning unit with a welcoming, positive culture that is based on mutual respect among students, faculty and staff. We aim to model enthusiasm and engagement for our students, and we want to make it easy and pleasant for other units to cooperate with us.

Interdisciplinary Issues

IAFS must creatively deal with issues and problems in a constantly changing setting. Some examples:

- Because we draw upon offerings from many different units, we create semester-specific course lists for registering students. We rely on courses in ECON, ENVS, HIST, GEOG, PSCI, WGST, the language departments, and beyond for these lists. Each semester, we must monitor the list for gaps in offerings for particular geographic concentrations, cancelled classes, classes in other departments with specific enrollment restrictions, and new or special offerings in other departments that enhance our curriculum.
- Our student degree audit is complex and must be updated with specific offerings and topics each semester. Our advisors must educate our majors on how to use the audit and other program materials we develop in order to stay on track with degree requirements. Study Abroad coursework adds to the complexity, as over half our majors have courses that transfer to their audits. Study Abroad courses must be approved for our major requirements and any unusual cases must be individually placed in the audit.
- Our third-year language requirement is a cornerstone of the major, but sometimes requires case-by-case assessment. Students may come to the major with heritage language skills or high school diplomas from other countries. Different language departments have different policies on whether native speakers can take their language classes, so there cannot be one single approach. Additionally, in cases where students have proficiency in a language not offered at CU, we must work with ALTEC to test the student's proficiency.
- Our interdisciplinary nature affects our budget and hiring. Most of our student credit hours are generated through courses in other departments. We must factor this into our operating budget, which is calculated in part

- through SCH. We must also factor in our lower SCH numbers for hiring proposals to the College.
- Our hiring arrangements must be flexible. Our teaching assistants come from the doctoral programs of our cognate departments, and those departments must meet their own instructional needs before assigning their graduate students to us. We must also respect the needs of other departments when creating MOUs, scheduling shared faculty, and planning cross-listed classes.
 - While campus conversations about interdisciplinary teaching frequently involve team teaching, our model is different. IAFS courses are interdisciplinary in the sense that one instructor, with training and experience, integrates multiple disciplines into the course. This is specifically laid out in our program teaching standards. The interdisciplinary nature of our IAFS courses is especially important in our gateway class, IAFS 1000: Global Issues and International Affairs, and our required senior seminar, IAFS 4500: The Post-Cold War World.

Conclusion

Interdisciplinarity is not about efficiency or consolidation. IAFS has particular organizational challenges in areas including curriculum building, the structuring of finances, and study abroad. Given the values-driven nature of our program, creative teachers and dedicated, well-trained staff are crucial for IAFS to function effectively. We must work together as a team to solve problems and foster relationships. In short, our approach to interdisciplinarity works best with a flexible and cooperative organizational structure that allows us to meet our students' needs.