

Sailing Against the Wind: Marketing International Studies Degrees

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Abstract: We present the findings of survey research designed around questions related to International Studies programs in the United States. The main goal of this research is to determine the current enrollment challenges and strengths facing IS programs, while identifying common curricular features and structures of the major. We also investigate the marketing strategies that International Studies programs use to reach students. The survey research also reports what strategies programs use to increase enrollment and improve the curriculum. We find that most programs in our sample report declining numbers of students, and that programs tend to rely on the same few marketing strategies to attract majors. We identify external (enrollment declines, perceptions of effectiveness of the degree) as well as internal (low administrative support, curricular design, and program competition) forces at play in these declines. Among the options available to IS program administrators and professors, recruitment and curricular updates are perhaps the best options available to leverage for program survival and growth.

Keywords: International Studies, Enrollments.

The US system of higher education is facing considerable headwinds. Recent curricular upheavals at the state and federal levels have created uncertainty over the future of higher education. Higher education is facing stagnating numbers of high school graduates and growing skepticism of its value, resulting in declining university enrollments across the country. Due to these multi-faceted challenges, the future of higher education in terms of content, enrollment, and access is increasingly uncertain.

The scholarship on International Studies programs has not yet grappled with these broader trends in higher education. Instead, two of the most highly cited papers on International Studies programs, found that they are “generally experiencing a high degree of growth” (Blanton, 2009) and that “despite the many obstacles that IS programs face, they have grown tremendously in popularity” (Blanton and Breuning, 2016). Given the changes in higher education that have occurred since these studies were conducted, this paper assesses whether International Studies programs are still in a period of growth, or whether they have entered a period of stagnation or even decline.

Insofar as studies have examined challenges that international studies programs face, the literature seems to locate those challenges as internal to the university system, rather than external. In some analyses, scholars have investigated administrative

challenges facing international studies programs, such as whether programs are best housed in a single department, such as political science, or in an interdisciplinary unit; whether political science department chairs see international studies as competition for majors (Knotts and Schiff, 2015); and the tensions and tradeoffs between international studies and global studies (Curran, 2018).

The context of decline or growth is one factor relating to how IS programs function as interdisciplinary communities sharing an epistemic focus on international cultural, social, and political concerns. On one level, how individual IS programs market themselves to and cultivate skillbuilding among students is relevant to what types of expectations IS students have from their community of majors and professors. On another level, coordination across multiple departments may introduce novel uncertainty less common in single-disciplinary departments where competing goals emerge over appropriate curriculum decisions and other relevant logistics. Significantly, as we address the ebb and flow of enrollment, we are inherently, though indirectly, investigating if the concept of “international community” an organizing principle of some human rights scholars (Habermas, 2007) itself is becoming a less relevant concept among U.S. students.

In this article, we present the findings of survey research designed around questions related to IS programs in the United States. The main goal of this research is to determine the current enrollment challenges and strengths facing IS programs, while identifying common curricular features and structures of the major. The survey research also reports what

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¹The authors thank Sara Jeffords, Oluyemi Stephens, and Vyankatesh Chavan for data collection and data entry assistance.

strategies programs use to increase enrollment and improve the curriculum.

We find that a majority of our respondents report declining numbers of majors, unlike previous work in this area. We also extend the conceptual foundation of previous work by considering the different marketing strategies that programs can pursue. In this area, we find that programs in our sample tend to pursue the same strategies of social media posts, print materials, and on-campus events. Relatively few programs run online advertising, run television ads, or utilize outside consultants to reach potential students.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the early 2000s, multiple scholars have assessed the value and impact of ‘internationalizing’ the undergraduate curriculum across various regions and institutions (Barber, 2007; Moulton, 2024; Brown, David, and Smallman, 2017). Additional studies investigated the creation of International Studies majors and contributed noteworthy observations about how ‘internationalizing’ is accomplished across institutions. These studies outline the various structures, requirements, and benefits offered by the creation of International Studies majors or minors (Blanton, 2009; Breuning and Ishiyama, 2004; Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Brown, Breuning and Quin, 2011; Pegg and Shively, 2006; Breuning and Quin, 2011; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2004; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2006).

Various studies have sought to expand on the initial assessment of IS programs by investigating the curricular composition of IS majors on a regional and national scale (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2004; Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Breuning and Quinn, 2011; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2006). Still others have explored the ways that IS programs market themselves to majors (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007) and characteristics of institutions that are more likely to contain IS majors (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2004). In addition, at least one study examines the popularity of programs and IS programs’ relationships to administrative environments (Blanton, 2009).

One caveat in studying IS is the difficulty in conceptualizing what the major entails. Some International Studies programs contain the interdisciplinary structure that most scholars agree is a distinguishing feature of IS (Rosow, 2003; Hey, 2004; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2004 and Keller, 2005; Brown 2006 for these citations), while upon closer inspection,

some IS majors would be better conceptualized as International Relations, a subdiscipline of political science. This has required scholars to create studies to investigate program characteristics closely, including the required courses to tap into the true interdisciplinary nature of the programs and their international characteristics.

As noted by various scholars, programs and institutions promote the focus on encouraging students to prepare for life in a globalizing world as the key advantage for undertaking an IS major (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Breuning and Quinn, 2011). Others have identified employability, developing skills for careers, and ‘entrepreneurial behaviors’ as important benefits to internationalization of curricula (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Moulton, 2024). Other advantages listed by various programs for the degree include developing international competence, critical thinking, promoting national security (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2006) personal enrichment, and expanding awareness and appreciation of other societies (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007).

Breuning and Ishiyama (2007) evaluated how IS programs explained the benefits of the major by surveying primarily undergraduate institutions (PUIs) in the Midwest, a total of 193 institutions classified as Masters I, Masters 2, and liberal arts colleges and universities in the region. They found that of 55 Midwest programs, 34 (61.8%) do not provide basic justification for the existence of the program. Of the remaining programs, 18 (32.7%) say the program is ‘geared to providing skills for a career in a globalized world’, and 3 (5.5%) justify themselves as a major that provides ‘personal enrichment’ (125). The institutions that related personal enrichment as a justification discussed the benefits of awareness, appreciation, and/or knowledge of other societies and cultures but did not connect this to tangible benefits for a person’s job or career. They found that IS majors are often presented like ‘traditional’ disciplinary majors, highlighting benefits but rarely justifying their existence. The acquisition of foreign language skills was mentioned as often as personal enrichment, but few respondents specified years required to reach competency (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007: 126-127). Only 11 institutions specified the required level of competency in their statements, and only 8 institutions that had a foreign language requirement required higher competency than the general degree requirement. Bachelor’s degree requirements in PUIs in the Midwest that offer IS majors also displayed

diversity in foreign language requirements, with 15 (28.8%) not requiring students to complete courses in foreign language. 22 (42.3%) requiring only 2 semesters of a single foreign language, 7 institutions requiring 3 semesters and 8 requiring 4 semesters. Most institutions addressed benefits of the IS major and advertise more than one benefit. The most frequent number of benefits listed is 4, followed by 3 benefits.

Breuning and Ishiyama (2007) also coded four separate skills associated with IS: intercultural competency, thinking skills, writing and speaking skills, and quantitative skills. The authors found that skills were mentioned less frequently than benefits, with less than half the institutions advertising the skill of intercultural competency. Only five institutions responded that personal enrichment was a benefit, with most focusing on practical benefits (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007: 128).

Existing studies illustrate that there is very little agreement among designers of curriculums about what courses and requirements constitute preparation for these goals and objectives. The most informative findings entail conceptualizing and measuring the interdisciplinary nature of IS majors, the degree of "structure" in terms of required courses for the major, and the listed skills, benefits, and outcomes for the major. However, variation has made it difficult to compare IS programs across institutions (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007).

Scholars have noted a diverse range of requirements for the IS major. Some institutions featured relatively structured programs that require a core of common classes, with others offering an unstructured major with various offerings constituting the required number of classes to complete the major (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2007). Ishiyama and Breuning (2004) found that 15 (62%) of programs required at least four common courses, and 9 (37%) of them required at least six. The extent of structure was also measured by whether a common introductory, methodology, or capstone was required, and the authors found that 8 out of 24 (33%) of the schools required introductions to international studies courses, 12 (50%) required research methodology course, and 45.8% (11/24) required some form of senior capstone (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2004: 141). The authors ran probit models to assess correlates to this degree of variation, and found that schools that offered a graduate degree in political science, history, or

business administration were more likely to have an international studies major. In addition, OLS models (p. 144) demonstrated that religious schools were more likely to have a structured IS major. In these models, the number of students and faculty, and proximity to a major city were not statistically significant predictors of change in an institution's likelihood of having an IS program, or its structure.

The programs also differed in their requirement for foreign language competency, with some programs requiring minimal foreign language courses and others requiring up to 4 semesters (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007). In addition, the utilization of study abroad and senior capstone/seminar courses in the major varied widely (Blanton, 2009; Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Brown et al, 2006; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2006). For example, students in the Midwest were less likely to study abroad, and the findings indicate that 31 of the 55 institutions that advertised study abroad as one of the benefits did not signify a unique benefit of the major because the opportunities were open to all students. Breuning and Ishiyama (2007) also found no statistically significant correlation between program structure and whether institutions highlighted study abroad as a benefit of the IS major (128).

In addition to a wide variation in the number of credit hours required for various structured components like methods, foreign language, study abroad and a capstone/seminar course, the programs studied also highlighted different skills, outcomes, benefits associated with the major, and stated outcomes and benefits (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Ishiyama and Breuning, 2006). "Institutions that advertise IS as a 'combination major' are far more likely to have structured majors than institutions that do not require students to complete a second major in a traditional discipline.... 8 of the 11 institutions that offer IS as a combination major also offer IS majors that are structured (but half of these only required one common course)" (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007: 128).

Another common assessment of various international programs in regional and national studies was that IS studies lack a coherent program. Previous studies highlighted the "eclectic" nature of IS studies, the lack of a departmental "home" for the programs, and the interdisciplinary nature of the programs. While Blanton (2009) highlighted a high degree of growth in IS programs, with a large proportion of programs increasing by 100% over the previous 5 years, he identified concerns that IS was vulnerable to "falling

between the cracks” of administrative support –not least because IS rarely stood apart as its own department "(Blanton, 2009: 225). Blanton's (2009)" ie add a space between the period and Blanton's. study indicated that while there has been a large growth in programs and that such programs existed in a strong institutional context, they rarely existed as separate departments in the traditional sense and often fell through the cracks in terms of administrative support (ibid 226).

Following the lead of scholars investigating this issue prior to 2011, we assess the relative size of the IS major, administrative structure, marketing strategies, and program structure by surveying a national sample of IS programs. In doing so, we hope to fill in a gap in the research that has shown little investigation over the past 13 years. These earlier studies on IS were conducted during a period of comparative vocal support for IS among many university systems (Blanton, 2009), the current political and educational environment warrants a fresh look at IS programs and where they are headed.

2. DATA-GATHERING PROCESS

Our team generated a list of universities from the website Data USA, that included the code 302001, identifying them as programs with international studies, and a list exported from the National Center for Education Statistics. The second list focused on universities with international relations programs. The two lists were merged to form a list of 432 universities, (all public or private non-profit 4-year institutions) that host an international studies degree program. The team then visited the websites of the 432 universities with international studies programs. We were looking to exclude international relations programs from our study, as international relations and international studies are distinct (if related and at times overlapping) fields. Excluding International Relations programs removed 48 programs from our list. While international relations programs were excluded, programs with similar but distinct titles such as global studies, international affairs, and/or diplomacy were included. An additional 96 programs lacked websites or any contact information on a program director or administrative associate, and thus were excluded from our list of programs to contact. Other programs were excluded due to incorrect inclusion in the first place (such as Master's programs in International Studies). This process resulted in narrowing the original list down to 257 international studies programs.

From visiting the websites of each of these programs, the name and email addresses for the program director (if one were listed) were collected. (6 programs either did not list a program director, or did not list contact information for one). Also, the program descriptions for the programs were also collected.

Each of the 257 program directors were emailed a survey, modeled on (Blanton and Breuning, 2016), that asked a series of questions about enrollment trends, potential causes of changes in enrollment, advertisement strategies, and related questions. The survey was sent out in April and May of 2025. See the survey instrument, included in the appendix I. In what follows, we describe the results of the survey.

3. FINDINGS

I. Overview of Programs

A total of 40 individuals responded to the anonymous survey, suggesting a roughly 15% response rate. 15 responses were from private selective universities, 7 from private nonselective universities, 10 from public flagship universities, and 8 from public regional universities. 13 of the universities are located in the Northeast, 8 in the Southeast, 11 in the Midwest, 5 in the Southwest, and 3 in the west. The programs represented varied greatly in size, from one program with only 2 majors to another program with 750. (This program was clearly an outlier, with the second largest program reporting 135 majors).² The average program size was 84 students, while the median program size was 26.

Most programs are located in an interdisciplinary capacity, with only 8 being housed in a single department. One respondent explained that “we are interdisciplinary, but the Institute for Global Studies is considered an academic unit equivalent to a department.”

International studies programs often include an array of requirements as part of their core curricula. The most common requirement is foreign language

²This program is a public flagship university located in the Southwest. It reports a stable number of majors, and is an interdisciplinary program. 40+ students graduate from this program per year (i.e. the highest level measured in our survey). As for what separates this program from others, it notes additional foreign language requirements, areas studies concentrations, and study abroad experiences. The curriculum includes research methods, foreign language, study abroad, and a senior capstone. The respondent reports relatively high optimism (70 of 100) in terms of the future of the program.

Q13 - Is your program housed in a single department, is it interdisciplinary, or is it structured differently? - Selected Choice

Field	Choice Count
Single department	8
Interdisciplinary	20
Other	3

Figure 1: Structure Program.

Q14 - Please indicate whether the following are required for your program's core curriculum: - Selected Choice

Field	Choice Count
Research methods	8
Foreign language	16
Study abroad	11
Senior capstone	14
Internship	2
Other	8

Figure 2: Core Curriculum of Programs.

study, followed by a senior capstone project and study abroad. 6 programs listed multiple of the above components as required.

Unique Program Features: Respondents were asked about which unique program features separate their program from others.³ Respondents mentioned an interdisciplinary focus, study abroad, and language requirements as features that distinguish their program.

Interdisciplinary Focus: Many respondents highlighted the interdisciplinary focus of their program. One form this takes is allowing students great latitude in upper division course selection: "As long as students meet disciplinary requirement they may completely customize their advanced electives (30 of the 45 required credits)." Another respondent explained that their program allows "the opportunity to design/pursue a 4-course concentration designed by the student."

Other programs have the ability to offer a wide range of classes from a single center: "We offer a core set of courses and rely only minimally on cross-listings; we have a core faculty with tenure homes in their disciplines and half of their teaching in Global Studies." Another program has a broader conception of subject matter covered by international studies: "We are more

interdisciplinary, with a strong focus on arts and culture as well as politics and economics. We used to run more as a set of Area studies program and while we have moved away from that, it's still far from a purely IR program."

Study Abroad: International studies programs tend to be unique in that they require a study abroad experience. "Students also study abroad for at least a semester as part of (a) program at an approved location," explained one respondent. "We combine 4 disciplines! We are [the] only major that requires study abroad," said another respondent.

Some programs allow the study abroad component to be completed within the US: "All students must complete a study abroad, however due to the increase in international students, we have had to add in internships that they can complete locally because of visa issues." Another respondent shared that "we also have opportunities for students to complete their study abroad at the Washington Center in DC." At least one program ensures students study abroad in countries in which English is not the first language: One program requires "study abroad for [a] minimum of six weeks preferably in [a] country where English is not primary/first language."

Language Study: Many international studies programs require language study. In one program,

³See the full set of responses to this question in appendix IV.

students “must meet a language proficiency benchmark in the language they are majoring in before graduation.” Another program includes requirements for “intensive second language training” while a third requires “advanced language components.”

However, not all respondents believed their programs had distinguishing features. “Probably nothing,” one respondent conceded. “Our political scientists are almost entirely political theorists or [American Political Development]. International studies isn’t a strength.” Another admitted “we don’t have any really. Two of the last 4 student body presidents were IA majors. One of the faculty is a leading pop culture and politics scholar. His classes are very popular, but the major doesn’t reflect that.”

II. Trends in Enrollments and Graduates

The majority of programs report having 1-10 students graduating per year. 9 programs see 11-20 students graduating, while only 6 programs saw more than 21 students graduating per year.

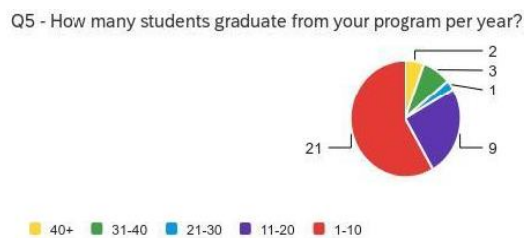


Figure 3: Annual Student Graduates Per Program.

Yet the majority of programs (19 of 36) have experienced a declining number of majors. 8 programs reported having stable numbers, and only 9 or 25% report increasing numbers of majors. Of the programs with increasing majors, 4 experienced a growth of 1-10 students over the past 5 years, 3 saw a growth of 11-20 students, while 2 reported growth of 21-30 students.

Of the programs with decreasing majors, 6 programs report losing 1-10 students over the past 5 years. 4 programs saw a decrease in 11-20 students, while three reported losing 21-30 students. Only one saw a decrease in 31-40 students, while 4 reported losing over 40 students in the past 5 years⁴.

⁴There appears to be no relationship between program structure and whether a program is increasing, decreasing, or stagnant. Of the 8 departments that were structured as single departments, only 1 reported increasing enrollments while 6 reported decreasing enrollments. 5 of the 20 interdisciplinary programs reported increasing enrollments, while 9 reported decreasing enrollments, and 5 programs were stagnant. But these relationships were not statistically significant.

Q6 - Over the past 5 years, has the number of students majoring in your program been increasing or decreasing?

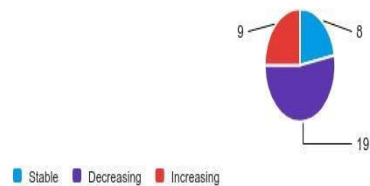


Figure 4: Change in Majors Over Past 5 Years.

III. Observations from Programs with Increasing Majors

Respondents from programs with increasing majors gave comments on why they believe their programs are expanding.⁵ The reasons suggest curricular changes, increased efforts at advertisement and outreach, and general interest in study abroad all play a role. But the trends can also be attributed to developments outside the ability of the program itself to shape.

Curricular changes: The curricular changes included both adding “concentrations that are important today”, as reported by one respondent. Another respondent added that an “increasing number of specialized tracks” were responsible for the program’s growth. Another noted that increasing the cap on students in the introductory course allowed more students into the program.

Other programs streamlined their curricula: “We did a major curriculum overhaul for our program 2 years ago, making it less complicated and a bit less burdensome for students. We have more majors now than any time since at least 2010 (note that we have fewer than 1500 students total, so all the data points are very small!). We’ve gone from 1-2 majors/yr (esp. during Covid) to about 5/year (and we expect some further growth in the next couple of years).”

Advertisement and outreach: One respondent credited the proactive advertising of job and grad school placements as key. Another respondent explained the growth as a product of working with the Admissions team: “[The growth in our program is due to] intentional outreach on our part. Our university is trying to attract more high performing students, and our program generally is successful at this, so I believe Admissions is also promoting our program more. This

⁵The complete set of responses are included in Appendix II.

upcoming year we have the highest jump in yield for any program in our college.”

Study abroad: 4 of the programs referenced study abroad opportunities as driving interest in their program. One respondent pointed out that study abroad is required in their program.

External factors: Several of the respondents seemed to suggest that the growth in their program was not due to any particular initiatives on their behalf, but of external changes. The ending of the pandemic was credited as a factor in driving interest in study abroad and international studies more generally.

IV. Observations from Programs with Declining Majors

20 respondents provided comments on why their programs are experiencing declining majors.⁶ The respondents credited curricular obstacles, university-wide enrollment trends, and perceived career prospects as key reasons for the decline. Changing student interests could also be playing a role.

Curricular obstacles: Aspects of the international studies curriculum may drive students away from the major. One respondent credited the “rigor of our program” as the reason for the decline in majors. Foreign language requirements are considered by many respondents as a burden that students are less willing to navigate, perhaps in part due to fewer language courses offered regularly. Changes in foreign language study at the high school level may also leave students less prepared and/or interested in study at the college level: “Our curriculum may also be somewhat ambitious, particularly in its requirement of three years of foreign language study. Unfortunately, foreign language learning is not widely emphasized at the high school level, nor is it broadly recognized as a valued skill in many areas of U.S. society.”

Study abroad requirements may also be an obstacle: “Perhaps it’s the study abroad/immersion requirement that is difficult for many students to meet, particularly our D1 athletes,” mused one respondent. Another respondent added that “the global pandemic impacted our major because we have a one semester study abroad requirement,” but didn’t explain whether the trend has changed since the ending of the pandemic.

Various respondents touched on issues related to the current political climate or immigration laws as potentially leading to IS program decline. As one respondent wrote, “the current political climate has posed challenges for programs focused on globalization, which can sometimes be viewed with skepticism”, and another suggested that recent presidential administrations may be “impacting multilateralism.”

Competition from other programs on campus may also be a challenge, with new ‘global’ programs like global commerce and global health attracting students who may otherwise major in international studies, one respondent explained.

University-wide enrollment trends: International studies programs are impacted by broader trends regarding enrollment at their universities, both in terms of the increasing or decreasing of the size of the student body and the general level of preparation of the students.

“Probably the same factors that are leading our overall enrollment numbers to decline—a declining number of high school graduates in our part of the country,” was the reason one respondent gave for the declining number of international studies majors. Another respondent pointed out that “our campus and our School of Liberal Arts have both seen significant enrollment declines over give or take the past decade.” Another respondent noted that their “student body has decreased by 50%,” while another noted that they are seeing “lower enrollment, [and] lower transfers from community colleges.”

Perceived career prospects: There is a concern that an international studies degree does not lead to a viable career for graduates. “The title ‘International Studies’ has not always been immediately recognizable or resonant for employers, prospective students, or their families,” according to one respondent. Another respondent explained that “students have changing priorities on their future career and what degree will best serve them. Many don’t consider an International Studies major as something that can help them in the future.” “[Students] want a clear connection between their major and their future careers (e.g., accounting, nursing),” suggested one respondent.

Changing student interests: Student interest in international affairs more generally may be declining and thereby decreasing interest in international studies

⁶See appendix III for the full set of responses to this question.

Q10A - Does your program engage in any of the follow to promote itself? Select all that apply. -

Selected Choice

Field	Choice Count
Social Media	18
Print materials (brochures, flyers, posters, etc)	30
Online advertising (such as Google Ads)	1
Campus events (such as majors fairs and new student orientation days)	29
Hiring of outside marketing firms	0
Television ads	0
Other (Please fill in the blank)	3
None	3

Figure 5: Marketing Strategies of Programs.

Q11 - If your program engages in marketing and advertising, what benefits or advantages are promoted about your program? - Selected Choice

Field	Choice Count
Career preparation	13
Critical thinking	7
Preparation for a globalized world	14
International competence	11
Study abroad	9
Other	4

Figure 6: Benefits Highlighted by Programs.

as a major. One respondent stated that “decreasing interest in international issues as interest in domestic issues has increased” may be a factor. Another respondent proposed that “our students have become increasingly inward-looking. They don’t seem to care much about what’s happening in the rest of the world.” A final respondent pointed out that international students are more interested in the major than domestic students.

V. Advertising and Promoting the International Studies Major

Individual departments can only do so much to shape their university’s enrollment trends and broader economic and political trends that may factor into a student’s decision to attend college and which degree to major in. Departments do have the ability to promote their programs and demonstrate the range of opportunities available to students who adopt international studies as a major. What steps do departments take to market their degree programs?

Most programs reported engaging in some sort of promotion efforts, with most programs following similar strategies: distributing print materials (30 programs), holding on-campus events (29), and leveraging social media (18). Only one program reported using online advertising, and only one mentioned hosting ads on the university television channel. None have hired outside marketing firms, but one mentioned using an “extensive hand written card campaign “from here, from NYC, from DC, from abroad).”⁷

Respondents indicated a broad array of benefits and advantages of their programs. Most programs emphasize “preparation for a globalized world” as a key aspect, while a more generic reference to “career preparation” is also highlighted. “International

⁷There do not appear to be relationships between marketing strategies and whether a program has increasing, decreasing, or stagnant enrollment. One reason is that most programs use the same strategies. Fewer programs post on social media (18 out of 35), but of the 18 that do, 6 have increasing enrollments, 7 have decreasing enrollments, and 5 have stagnant enrollments.

Q15 - Assess the level of administrative support for your program (0 being lowest...

Field	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance	Responses	Sum
Curricular support (classroom materials, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration)	0.00	100.00	43.97	33.22	1103.70	30	1319.00
Budgetary support	1.00	90.00	40.39	29.93	896.10	28	1131.00
Hiring/staffing	0.00	92.00	40.96	28.43	808.37	24	983.00
Topic-specific extracurricular events (speakers, workshops, career fairs, etc.)	2.00	97.00	43.11	26.50	702.10	27	1164.00

Figure 7: Level of Administrative Support.

competence” is also stressed, followed by study abroad and critical thinking.

Not all programs do engage in marking and promotion, however. One respondent from a program with declining majors stated that “it should also be said that we’ve never really done much to promote it. In a Department of History and Political Science, with no faculty member specifically responsible for the International Political Studies program, it tends to fall through the cracks.” Another pointed out that “time constraints of faculty, [with] virtually no administrative support” has led them to not advertise the program. Another said that “we have a very small school and very small program. We don’t put much into recruiting.”

VI. Administrative Support for International Studies Programs

The previous section suggested that the lack of resources and support can hinder the ability of programs to effectively promote themselves. Survey respondents were given the opportunity to signal the level of administrative support they feel they receive for their international studies program. They were asked about support across four areas: curricular support, budgetary support, hiring and staffing, and topic-specific extracurricular events.

The highest average response was in terms of curricular support (43.97 out of a possible 100), which included classroom materials and the facilitation of interdisciplinary collaboration. Yet the standard deviation was also highest for this response (33.22) suggesting a wide range of perceived level of curricular support across universities. The next highest level of support was in regards to topic-specific extracurricular

events (43.11), which includes speakers, workshops, and career fairs. This response also had the lowest standard deviation (26.50), suggesting that perceptions about administrative support are more consistent across universities. Perceived levels of administrative support for hiring/staffing and budgetary support were lowest (40.96 and 40.39 respectively) with standard deviations of 28.43 and 29.93.

The analysis suggests that the programs surveyed on average feel unsupported in terms of administrative needs. One reason for this may be the unique administrative structure of some international studies programs. One respondent explained “administratively our program is unusual in that it is situated in Interdisciplinary Studies which is classified as a unit and not a department, so the amount of support (and administrative oversight/expectations) are less than actual academic departments.”

In other cases, the decline in majors may lead universities administrations to prioritize other programs over international studies, leading to a cycle of declining students resulting in less administrative support, which makes it more difficult to attract and retain students. This is particularly the case with hiring faculty to teach in international studies.

4. DISCUSSION

I. Overall Observations

The findings section summarized our results on the details of programs included our study, their enrollment trends and reasons for increasing or decreasing majors, how they promote their programs, and levels of administrative support for international studies. The

programs included in our study come from all geographic regions of the US, and include large programs with hundreds of students to small programs with relatively few students.

9 programs report seeing growth in students over the past 5 years, with 2 programs reporting increasing their student population size by 21-30 students. Most programs, however, report a declining number of students. While the decline may seem modest in some cases, with 6 programs reporting declines in 1-10 students, 4 programs report high losses of 40+ students over the past 5 years.

Reasons given for the decline in students include limited career prospects of international studies majors, curricular obstacles such as study abroad and language requirements, changing student interest in international issues, and overall university enrollment trends are given as reasons for declining numbers of students.

While most programs do advertise and promote their programs, they mainly do so through print materials, on-campus events, and social media posts. Few programs engage in alternative methods, such as online advertising, TV advertisements, or the hiring of outside marketing firms. In their advertising, programs tend to emphasize preparation for a globalized world, international competence, and career preparation as a benefit and advantage of their program.

Yet the lack of administrative support may hinder the ability for programs to do more to promote their programs. While the reasons for lower levels of administrative support can vary, one can be related to the interdisciplinary nature of many international studies programs. As one respondent explained, "interdisciplinary programs are [...] challenging to manage and build, particularly within institutions that are really centered around disciplinary departments. Our program is largely dependent on courses offered by various departments, and we don't have our own faculty. Thus, it is hard to get much faculty engagement or direct curricular control even when there is robust student interest." Interdisciplinary units like international studies programs may find it difficult to compete for resources in relation to departments at 'department-centered' universities.

In terms of the overall level of optimism or pessimism regarding the future of their program, the average level was cautiously optimistic at 62.65 out of 100.

II. Recommendations about Enrollment Strategies

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide recommendations on enrollment strategies that other programs might consider.⁸

Flexibility with Degree Requirements: This can take the form of making study abroad optional instead of required. One respondent explained "we strive to make the major work for the largest number of students. For example, we do not require study abroad because we have a large number of athletes and they usually cannot be gone for a semester, even off-season. Therefore, by not requiring a semester study abroad we make the major more available to more students." However, it should be noted that one unique feature of the international studies program, as noted by several respondents, is that it is the only major that requires study abroad. Making study abroad optional may diminish what makes the degree unique.

Reducing Required Credit Hours: Reducing the number of required credit hours may lower barriers to students majoring in international studies. This, however, may make it difficult for programs to require competency in a secondary language

Encourage Cross-Listing of Courses: One respondent recommended "allow[ing] double-counting of interdisciplinary courses across majors to encourage double-majoring."

Having Students Market the Program: Having information about the international studies program spreading by word of mouth between students is helpful to increase interest. One respondent recommended "develop[ing] a strong student cohort to spread the word organically."

Creating a Minor: Adding a minor might encourage students to take international studies classes while pursuing their major. One respondent suggested "offer[ing] a minor option that complements other majors and is relatively easy to finish."

Adding an Introductory Class: Adding an introductory class major help bolster program cohesion and promote retention. Allowing introductory classes to satisfy general education requirements can attract interest.

⁸See appendix V for the full set of responses to this question.

Begin a Speaker Series: Adding a speaker series may “showcase different international careers that are open to students who major in the program,” one respondent pointed out. It also allows opportunities for alumni to discuss their career paths.

Adding Concentrations to Attract New Students: One respondent explained how their program is adding a concentration in Sustainability to attract science majors. Another respondent’s program is creating a center for international and global studies that would add two area studies concentrations in Latin America and Caribbean Studies and North Africa and Middle East Studies.

Which of these recommendations are most appropriate depends on the program in question. A program with a large number of requirements may not find it efficacious to bolstering student interest by adding a new required introductory course. An international studies program with only a few faculty may not need an introductory course, and may only have limited capacity to add new concentrations. Indeed, not all of the recommendations are mutually compatible: a program cannot add requirements while simultaneously reducing credit hours, for example. There are potential costs and tradeoffs from implementing a given recommendation: Making study abroad optional may undermine what makes international studies distinctive. Nevertheless, these recommendations may be considered a starting place for programs looking to increase student interest.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our survey responses revealed various challenges and suggestions for IS program recruitment and growth. Taking stock of the state of IS programs in our sample, it appears that optimism is lower than it was a decade or more ago. Some issues identified in the previous wave of research are persistent enough that they might simply be considered features of the IS major, such as administrative neglect and variation between universities’ IS program requirements.

We also examined marketing strategies that IS programs use to reach students. We find that most programs use the same set of strategies, including social media posts, print materials, and in-person events like major’s fairs. There has been less experimentation (perhaps due to budgetary constraints) with other avenues, such as online advertisements or enlisting marketing firms. The lack of variation in

marketing strategies across our sample precludes generalizations on what types of marketing strategies are most effective in attracting students. But future research projects might use creative research designs to increase variation in marketing strategies and provide suggestions on what strategies work best (and when).

However, with most programs in a state of decline, researchers identified external (enrollment declines, perceptions of effectiveness of the degree) as well as internal (low administrative support, curricular design, and program competition) forces at play in these declines. Moreover, among the options available to IS program administrators and professors, recruitment and curricular updates are perhaps the best options available to leverage for program survival and growth.

The current political climate was, as anticipated, speculated by some respondents to influence declining enrollment, but it is worth noting that the number of political climate-referencing mentions were matched or outnumbered by comments about curricular rigor and simple math (fewer high school graduates and transfer students). Therefore, professors of IS are, unfortunately, finding themselves facing multiple challenges from different directions.

If there is a source of optimism in our survey findings, it will be related to the innovations in curricular and extra-curricular design that professors are implementing to encourage growth of their programs. While these also come at a potential price, such innovations have the potential to make the major more accessible to students who may not have pursued the degree before. Should professors find similar innovations that could assist with recruitment in an inward-looking political climate, we might find more cause for optimism.

Caveats about these results are worth mentioning. First, the small-*n* and intentional sampling method would point to caution that this sample may not be representative of the average IS program in the U.S. Furthermore there is the issue of non-response bias resulting from the programs that declined to participate in the survey. Readers should exercise caution generalizing too broadly from the results presented here.

Future studies should perform more extensive survey gathering to allow for weighting based on the

actual population of IS programs to increase the external validity of these findings. Qualitative methods, especially content analysis of catalog, marketing, and recruiting media may also reveal trends associated with more successful IS programs, while mixed methods analysis could reveal statistical correlations between media use variations and enrollment patterns. Finally,

as declining student interest in international affairs may be an important contributing factor to declining enrollment, studies that probe the perceived philosophical and professional implications of an IS degree may also add an important dimension to these findings.

Appendix I. Survey Instrument

International Studies Program Study Survey Questions

Q1 The following survey questions are confidential. All participants must be at least 18 years of age. To continue, please select from the following:

- I do consent to take the survey. (1)
- I do not consent to take the survey. (2)

Q2 What best describes your university?

- Public regional (1)
- Public flagship (2)
- Private nonselective (3)
- Private selective (4)

Q3 In what region of the country is your university located?

- West (1)
- Southwest (2)
- Midwest (3)
- Southeast (4)
- Northeast (5)

Q4 How many students are majoring in your program?

Q5 How many students graduate from your program per year?

- 1-10 (1)
- 11-20 (2)
- 21-30 (3)
- 31-40 (4)
- 40+ (5)

Q6 Over the past 5 years, has the number of students majoring in your program been increasing or decreasing?

- Increasing (1)
- Decreasing (2)

- Stable (4)

If Q6 = Increasing

Q7A If it is increasing, to what do you attribute the growth in your program?

If Q6 = Decreasing

Q7B If it is decreasing, to what do you attribute the decline in your program?

If Q6 = Increasing

Q8A If it is increasing, by how many students has your program increased in the past 5 years?

- 1-10 (1)
- 11-20 (2)
- 21-30 (3)
- 31-40 (4)
- 40+ (5)
- If Q6 = Decreasing

Q8B If it is decreasing, by how many students has your program decreased in the past 5 years?

- 1-10 (1)
- 11-20 (2)
- 21-30 (3)
- 31-40 (4)
- 40+ (5)

Q10A Does your program engage in any of the following to promote itself? Select all that apply.

- Social Media (1)
- Print materials (brochures, flyers, posters, etc) (2)
- Online advertising (such as Google Ads) (3)
- Campus events (such as majors fairs and new student orientation days) (4)
- Hiring of outside marketing firms (5)
- Television ads (6)
- Other (Please fill in the blank) (7) _____
- None (9)

If Q10A = Other (Please fill in the blank)

Q10B If not, why has your program chosen not to engage in marketing and advertising?

Q11 If your program engages in marketing and advertising, what benefits or advantages are promoted about your program?

- Career preparation (1)
- Critical thinking (2)
- Preparation for a globalized world (3)
- International competence (4)
- Study abroad (5)
- Other (6) _____

Q12 What unique program features separate your program from other programs?

Q13 Is your program housed in a single department, is it interdisciplinary, or is it structured differently?

- Single department (1)
- Interdisciplinary (2)
- Other (3)

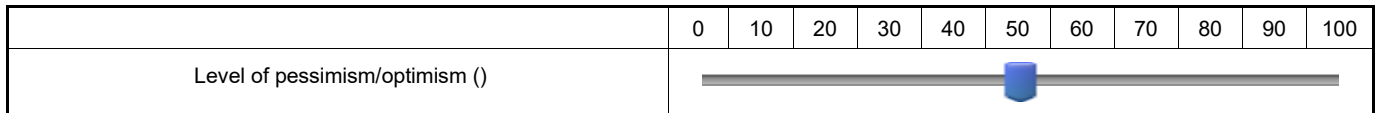
Q14 Please indicate whether the following are required for your program's core curriculum:

- Research methods (1)
- Foreign language (2)
- Study abroad (3)
- Senior capstone (4)
- Internship (5)
- Other (6)

Q15 Assess the level of administrative support for your program (0 being lowest)

	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Curricular support (classroom materials, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration) ()											
Budgetary support ()											
Hiring/staffing ()											
Topic-specific extracurricular events (speakers, workshops, career fairs, etc.) ()											

Q16 How optimistic or pessimistic are you about the future of your program (0 being completely pessimistic, 100 highly optimistic)



Q17 Are there any enrollment strategies you have implemented that you would recommend to other programs?

Q18 Do you have any additional comments or feedback regarding your program or this survey?

Appendix II. Responses to Q7A: "If it is increasing, to what do you attribute the growth in your program?"

- Success grad school and job placement; proactive advertizing [sic] of successes
- New program
- Increased advertisement and promotion of the opportunity through a variety of offices on campus. Also, program growth coincides somewhat with growth in our study abroad numbers post-pandemic.
- We did a major curriculum overhaul for our program 2 years ago, making it less complicated and a bit less burdensome for students. We have more majors now than anytime since at least 2010 (note that we have fewer than 1500 students total, so all the data points are very small!). We've gone from 1-2 majors/yr (esp. during Covid) to about 5/year (and we expect some further growth in the next couple of years).
- Covid is over. Our program requires study abroad. Increased cap on intro course that allows more students per year to take course.
- Increasing number of specialized tracks
- post COVID interest in travel and study abroad, and presence of our Madrid campus.
- intentional outreach on our part. Our university is trying to attract more high performing students, and our program generally is successful at this, so I believe Admissions is also promoting our program more. This upcoming year we have the highest jump in yield for any program in our college.
- Concentrations that are important today; language requirement; study abroad opportunities and internships; co-curricular opportunities.

Appendix III. Responses to Q7B: "If it is decreasing, to what do you attribute the decline in your program?"

- Covid impacting international everything. Trump 1 and 2 impacting multilateralism. Lack of clear path to jobs. No BS option at our university.
- national trends
- Competing 'global' programs at the institution (global commerce, global health)
- The rigor of our program.
- Our campus and our School of Liberal Arts have both seen significant enrollment declines over give or take the past decade. We are not immune to the larger trends.
- It is a combination of things: Covid, immigration law changes, study abroad programs were eliminated (they are back now but the growth never came back), we hear from students that the language requirement is burdensome, enrollments are decreasing nationwide

- "The title ""International Studies"" has not always been immediately recognizable or resonant for employers, prospective students, or their families. Additionally, the current political climate has posed challenges for programs focused on globalization, which can sometimes be viewed with skepticism.
- Our curriculum may also have been somewhat ambitious, particularly in its requirement of three years of foreign language study. Unfortunately, foreign language learning is not widely emphasized at the high school level, nor is it broadly recognized as a valued skill in many areas of U.S. society.
- Our students have become increasingly inward-looking. They don't seem to care much about what's happening in the rest of the world. They want a clear connection between their major and their future careers (e.g., accounting, nursing).
- "We have a very small school and very small program. We don't put much into recruiting. However, I think the number of students minoring in the program has increased."
- Probably the same factors that are leading our overall enrollment numbers to decline--a declining number of high school graduates in our part of the country. But it should also be said that we've never really done much to promote it. In a Department of History and Political Science, with no faculty member specifically responsible for the International Political Studies program, it tends to fall through the cracks.
- The global pandemic significantly impacted our major because we have a one semester study abroad requirement.
- Lower enrollment, lower transfers from community colleges
- Decreasing interest in international issues as interest in domestic issues has increased
- The overall student body declining.
- Number of requirements, language requirement
- our student body has decreased by 50%
- The range of classes we offer has declined but also students have changing priorities on their future career and what degree will best serve them. Many don't consider an International Studies major as something that can help them in their future.
- Lack of access to courses for language requirement; lack of resources, including compensation/time for effective leadership and faculty.
- I don't know. Would value any insights. Perhaps it's the study abroad/immersion requirement that is difficult for many students to meet, particularly our D1 athletes. The program seems more compelling to international students than our domestic ones.
- Appendix IV. Responses to Q12: "What unique program features separate your program from other programs?"
- IS is linked to a dynamic institute that makes our program function like a private college while at a public flagship school. Lots of funded travel, extensive research opportunities, engaged alums, seminars.
- Self-designed concentration, course of study proposal in SO year with integrated Off-campus experience in JR year and capstone course in SR year, 4-5 semesters of non-English language
- Students are required to earn an engineering degree.
- Our May term offers students a shorter version of study abroad that is more affordable. Students travel with professors from the university and other students in highly specialized and unique courses.

- Not different from other international studies programs. On campus is one of a few interdisciplinary programs
- We are the only major on a large campus with more than 20,000 students that requires students to study abroad.
- It's interdisciplinary, requires study abroad, offers a variety of course options to fulfill requirements.
- mandatory study abroad for minimum of six weeks preferably in country where English is not primary/first language.
- From other IS programs? We are more interdisciplinary, with a strong focus on arts and culture as well as politics and economics. We used to run more as a set of Area studies programs and while we have moved away from that, it's still far from a purely IR program. From other programs on our campus? Our study abroad requirement and advanced language components.
- Study abroad is required, at least 10 weeks. Language study through the intermediate level. Intro course with engaging speakers that are exemplary of different ways to live an international life and what that concept means.
- We don't have any really. Two of the last 4 student body presidents were IA majors. One of the faculty is a leading pop culture and politics scholar. his classes are very popular, but the major doesn't reflect that.
- Small program, personalized attention.
- Very interdisciplinary, but mainly ANT and PSC.
- Probably nothing. Our political scientists are almost entirely political theorists or APD. International studies isn't a strength.
- Our university's Jesuit mission and values and our New York City location are key features.
- Study abroad requirement and intensive second language training, we also have opportunities for students to complete their study abroad at the Washington Center in DC.
- As long as students meet disciplinary requirements they may completely customize their advanced electives (30 of the 45 required credits)
- We offer a core set of courses and rely only minimally on cross-listings; we have a core faculty with tenure homes in their disciplines and half of their teaching in Global Studies; we incorporate both the social sciences and humanities; we have a focus on social justice
- We combine 4 disciplines! We are only major to require study abroad.
- Social science interdisciplinary, themed concentrations
- We are multidisciplinary and the only major on campus that requires study abroad.
- The program combines a major in international studies with a major in a language. Students also study abroad for at least a semester as part of our program at an approved location and must meet a language proficiency benchmark in the language they are majoring in before graduation.
- All students must complete a study abroad, however due to the increase in international students, we have had to add in internships that they can complete locally because of visa issues.
- Additional foreign language requirements, area studies concentration, study-abroad experience

- Interdisciplinary focus with the opportunity to design/pursue a 4 course concentration designed by the student.

APPENDIX V. RESPONSES TO Q17: “ARE THERE ANY ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES YOU HAVE IMPLEMENTED THAT YOU WOULD RECOMMEND TO OTHER PROGRAMS?”

- Being flexible. We strive to make the major work for the largest number of possible students. For example, we do not require study abroad because we have a large number of athletes and they usually cannot be gone for a semester, even off-season. Therefore, by not requiring a semester study abroad we make the major available to more students.
- We are working to create a center for international and global studies which would house International Studies and East-Asian Studies, as well as 2 concentrations: Latin American and Caribbean Studies and North Africa and Middle East Studies.
- Ease of double-majoring
- Opening up the curriculum, having fewer requirements to be more in line with other campus majors, allowing summer study abroad (6+weeks) to count.
- Updating program; students talking to students.
- Reduced the number of required credit hours.
- A lot of outreach.
- "Offer a minor option that complements other majors and is relatively easy to finish.
- Allow double -counting of interdisciplinary courses across majors to encourage double majoring.
- We have strong student interest, so we haven't had to "sell" ourselves very hard—I don't have any recommendations!
- We have included the name of our specializations in the common app and we have also reduced our major from 12 units to 11 units.
- We started an intro class that helps build cohort and unite faculty around a goal.
- The program director teaches a one-credit introductory course for students. This helps with program cohesion (because the program is so interdisciplinary) and retention.
- I am now part of the Critical Languages Scholarship Program to help persuade students to study a language abroad where they can get funding. I am also implementing a speaker series next year that will showcase different international careers that are open to students who major in the program. It also includes alumni students who are now working in different career fields.
- We are adding a fourth concentration on Sustainability to encourage science majors to think more interdisciplinary.
- Develop a strong student cohort to spread the word organically.
- Entry level courses are permitted to satisfy GE requirements [sic]. Promote minor as add on to other majors.
- Working on these now.

APPENDIX VI. RESPONSES TO Q18: "DO YOU HAVE ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS OR FEEDBACK REGARDING YOUR PROGRAM OR THIS SURVEY?"

- The four sliders at the bottom of the previous page I left at zero, since I don't understand the prompt well or the context. But "zero" does not represent a true answer.
- I would love to hear about how to increase enrollment. We have gone from 350 majors in 2011 to 137 in 2025. I know a lot of this is national trends, but if other universities have implemented strategies to increase enrollment, please let me know.
- It is difficult to get hiring/staff resources as our number of majors decreases...
- I don't know if this is happening on other campuses but I suspect it is. Our program was launched in 2006. We have consistently lost faculty numbers since then. The loss of, say, an African historian or a West Europeanist political scientist greatly reduces our course offerings in those areas. The worst decline has been in foreign languages. We require students to complete a 300-level foreign language course but this is no longer possible in Arabic, Chinese or German on our campus and barely possible in French. My point here is that our program was designed when we had 240 faculty. Today, we are closer to half that size and, as a consequence, our course offerings have declined across the board and some of our requirements are barely or no longer sustainable.
- What we clearly lack is a methods course. But we have no faculty dedicated to the program and even fielding a capstone is extremely challenging (this spring was our first ever and it was co-taught as an interdisciplinary distinction seminar).
- Some options for the multiple choice should be select as many as apply.
- Interdisciplinary programs are challenging to manage and build, particularly within institutions that are really centered around disciplinary departments. Our program is largely dependent on courses offered by various departments, and we don't have our own faculty. Thus, it's hard to get much faculty engagement or direct curricular control even when there is robust student interest.
- Administratively our program is unusual in that it is situated in Interdisciplinary Studies which is classified as a unit and not a department, so the amount of support (and administrative oversight/expectations) are less than actual academic departments.
- No - would love to get the results.

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Received on 07-02-2026

Accepted on 09-03-2026

Published on 26-03-2026

<https://doi.org/10.65879/3070-6335.2026.02.01>

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