In Fall 2013, the SAIS Student Government Association (SGA) was approached regarding input on updating certain key aspects of the SAIS M.A. requirements, specifically, the core requirements and the ability to study in a more interdisciplinary manner. With this goal in mind, students from the SGA Academic Affairs Committees in both Washington and Bologna met with staff and faculty from the SAIS Academic Committee on 3 December to discuss the current framework and how it might be revised for improvement.

The objective of this white paper is to:

1. Outline motivations and general considerations for revising SAIS M.A. requirements
2. Provide options for improving the current framework
3. Propose a plan for soliciting broad-based input from students and faculty

It is important to note that this paper intends to present the varying options rather than to assess which may be the most desirable. Feedback from all students, as well as faculty and relevant staff, who are willing to share their opinions, will be vital in the final decision-making process.
SAIS Core Requirements
According to a SAIS Europe Admissions Blog Post (see Appendix 2): “To ensure that all SAIS graduates have acquired a common set of useful skills and knowledge, we require them to meet a set of requirements in Economics, languages, history and political science.”

Motivations for Revising the Current Framework
- More clearly define the objectives of the core system and determine whether the current system reflects those objectives.
- Ensure that core subjects remain relevant to the SAIS degree.
- Communicate motivation for core requirements to students.
- Enhance flexibility to accommodate diverse student backgrounds and goals.
- Improve transparency of grading and consistency of standards.

Quick Wins
- Compile existing materials to create one central place for accessing information on the cores and their purpose. The Academic Guide being compiled by the SGA Academic Affairs Committee might provide one forum for this information.
- Add a discussion on the cores to orientation, including how students should select their cores and what value they add.
- Offer review sessions prior to each exam, which can be run by students or faculty.
- Request that department heads review any concentration-specific requirements related to core selection to ensure that these guidelines remain relevant. Require that concentrations communicate the reasoning behind these decisions.
- Allow students to take core classes during pre-term just as they can take economics classes. Consider policies that will ensure adequate enrollment, such as requiring core classes to be completed by the start of the second year or making certain cores prerequisites for more advanced courses.
- Increase transparency by developing and distributing a concept list, grading rubric, and pass rates for each core to be used at both campuses, whether taken as a class or a waiver. Be sure to define parameters, such as the technology that can be used, length of essays, time allotted, etc.

Long-Term Changes
The below options for improving the core framework were informed by the following considerations:
- Should all students have the same core requirements or should cores be tailored by concentration? Are there still core courses that are relevant for all SAIS students?
- Are cores meant to function like prerequisites that prepare students for a more advanced curriculum, or to represent a basic standard to employers?
- Should cores incorporate more of an element of practical application and skills?
- Should students be expected to have a basic knowledge of all four core areas?
- How does the SAIS core curriculum compare to peer institutions?

1 See Appendix 1 for a compilation of the information currently available online.
1. Condense into Four Two-Credit Courses
To ensure students achieve at least a basic understanding of all four areas, abbreviate current classes to a half-semester length and require all four to be done by the start of the second year.

2. Offer Differentiated Levels
Students have different backgrounds and thus different exposures to core subjects. Allow, or require, students to take a more advanced version of each core if they can prove they fulfilled the requirement previously. This prevents students from having to repeat classes.

3. Designate Core “Areas”
Designate core areas in place of core classes. For example, all students must take one history class, one theory class, and one practical application class from a list of pre-approved options.

4. Equalize Core and Economics Waivers
The economics and IR waivers processes differs significantly. Economics and Quantitative waivers are online, open book exams with a minimum passing grade of 60. A list of tested concepts is also provided. Equalizing standards across disciplines would ensure similar expectations for both halves of the SAIS degree while improving transparency.

5. Require a Skills/Practical Application Core
As a professional school, SAIS offers many opportunities to acquire tangible skills that are in demand by employers. Consider developing an additional skills-based core requirement. Students could be required to select from a list of applied or skills-oriented classes, or from the existing skills course offered through Career Services. This option also addresses concerns that the cores are too theoretical and may better prepare students for the professional world.

6. Develop Online Core Courses
Developing an online version of the core classes, similar to what has been developed for Comparative National Systems, provides students an alternative that allows for more flexibility and accounts for differences in learning styles.

7. Separate “Policy” Cores and “Practitioner” Cores
Have students select a policy-oriented track or practitioner-oriented track, and differentiate core requirements between the two.

Next Steps: Collecting Feedback from Students and Faculty
To ensure changes adequately reflect student sentiment and have student buy-in, the SGA Academic Affairs Committee suggests that student input be solicited more broadly. The Committee is also willing to coordinate the collection of this feedback. An initial survey, designed with input from relevant faculty or staff, could be distributed and followed up with by a town hall once potential changes have been further defined.

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2 See Appendix 2 for an overview of core curricula at peer institutions
Potential Student Survey Questions:

- What campus did you attend in your first year?
- What do you see as the primary purpose of the core requirements?
- What core requirements do you plan to meet, or have already met?
- When did you complete all core requirements?
- What made you decide to select those exams? (Required by department, workload, gap in knowledge, etc.)
- What study materials did you utilize or plan to utilize? (Blackboard resources, notes and study guides from other students, online tutorials)?
- Did you take the core as a course, an audit, or a waiver? Why did you choose this option?
- How much time did you spend preparing for core exams if you chose to self-study?
- Where did you get your information about core requirements? (other students, department advisor, SAIS website, SAIS “redbook,” Facebook, My JHU, etc.)
- What information about the core requirements would you like to have had ahead of time?
- What improvements would you make to the core requirements?
- Questions addressing the specific potential future changes could also be asked

We propose that the survey be completed by the end of March, with the town hall element integrated into the Deans’ Forum in March.

The SGA also strongly recommends that broad-based faculty feedback be solicited. It would be enlightening to gather input not only from senior professors and those currently teaching the cores, but all faculty and lecturers.

In addition, it may also be beneficial to survey career services staff, alumni, and/or employers on how SAIS might improve its curriculum to better reflect the market.
SAIS Concentrations
According to the newest SAIS website, the SAIS MA degree currently offers concentrations under two umbrellas: “Global Themes” and “Regions of the World.”

Motivations for Revising the Current Framework
• The only official process for combining concentrations is dual concentrations, but this requires taking many additional courses and only some crossover into the two areas to be able to complete both requirements.
• IR is by definition an interdisciplinary field that is constantly evolving. Increasing flexibility can also enable the SAIS degree to naturally adapt to changing global trends.
• The cross-listing process is not transparent and at times seems arbitrary.
• It can be difficult to take classes outside of your umbrella department (e.g. regional or IDEV classes when you are a functional concentrator).
• Enrollment in the regional concentrations is declining.
• Strict requirements mean students have less flexibility to choose classes based on their backgrounds and future goals. Because flexibility varies by department, it can be a determining factor in concentration rather than student interest.

Long-Term Changes
The below options for improving the core framework were informed by the following general considerations:
• What is the added value for a minor/specialization/track? To what extent should minors/specializations/tracks be formalized (perhaps developing suggested paths would be adequate)? Some students are already choosing this sort of path informally, what is the benefit of labeling it?
• Is adding too many tags to the current degree counterproductive?
• Should concentration requirements be relaxed to facilitate these options? How might (or might not) this prevent students from taking essential classes?
• Do concentrations as they currently exist reflect market demand and global trends? To what degree should changes incorporate flexibility for preferences to change over time?
• Would allowing students to pass out of certain required classes as they can for econ requirements address some of these problems?
• What is realistic for students to fulfill given competing interests?

1. Add Secondary Specializations
Offering secondary specializations, that function like minors, would allow students to pair their regional specialization with a functional one, or vice versa, thus tailoring their degree to fit their needs and expanding their employment prospects. This would take the form of a prescribed number of classes (2-3 perhaps) and should be an option for all concentrations in order to be equitable. Some questions to consider:
• Should specific classes be required, such as a “gateway” course, or should students be allowed to pick any classes from the secondary specialization?
• How would this affect bidding priority?
2. Define Specializations/Tracks within Concentrations
Similar to the economics specializations and the IDEV professional tracks, students could elect to focus on a subset area within the primary concentration. For example, Conflict Management with a regional specialization in Africa or a professional track in conflict prevention. Some questions to consider:

- Should specific classes be required or should students be allowed to pick any classes from the specialization area?
- Does it make sense to have concentration-specific specializations/tracks (more effort to develop and less consistent) or should they simply be selected from existing concentrations (less effort, but possibly less relevant)?

3. Facilitate “Joint” Concentrations
Unlike minors or specializations/tracks, this option suggests a curriculum where more than one concentration is selected but neither is formally subordinate to the other. This could be an alternative to the existing dual concentration option. Instead of requiring 6 classes in two separate concentrations, a joint concentrator might be required to complete a total of 8 classes, 3-4 in each of the concentrations plus one designated, required cross-listed course. Students not selecting this option would still be required to take the full 6 classes in their concentration. Some questions to consider:

- Should both a dual concentration and joint concentration option be offered?
- Would joint concentrators receive joint bidding priority?

4. Offer Two-Credit, Half-Semester Courses
Allow students to gain more exposure to another area, concentration, or region without requiring an entire class. These could be paired together to allow for breadth rather than depth. Some questions to consider:

- Should these be shortened versions of existing classes, or an entirely new set of classes (or a combination of both)?
- If students take two half-semester courses, will they count towards the 16-class requirement?
- Is it possible to offer enough two-credit courses at the outset to make this option viable?

5. Allow Self-Designed Programs
Offering a self-designed option could be an alternative to the existing General IR concentration, which is arguably a weak point for SAIS as it lacks a clear focus (and is thus a discouraged option) but also is not flexible enough to be a true self-designed program. This type of program could have a similar level of requirements as other concentrations (6 classes), but class selection would be completely open rather than limited to certain departments as General IR is now. An approval process could be implemented to ensure this option maintains a level of integrity and coherence similar to the other concentrations. Some questions to consider:

- Who would approve these programs?
- What department would they be under?
- What type of bidding status would self-designed concentrators receive?
Next Steps: Collecting Feedback from Students and Faculty

The SGA Academic Affairs Committee is preparing a survey to canvas students on their general experiences with concentrations and will be compiling best practices to be shared with Department heads. The scope of this survey could be broadened to include some questions related to interdisciplinary study. This survey is scheduled to be completed by the end of April.
Appendix 1 - Existing Public Information on the Cores

1. Accessing Core Exam Self-Study Guides (SAIS Library: Ask a Librarian)

2. Core Requirements (Legacy website)

All M.A. candidates at SAIS must pass either an examination or a class in at least two of these four core subjects:

- American Foreign Policy Since World War II
- Comparative National Systems
- Evolution of the International System
- Theories of International Relations

M.A. students are expected to pass the two required core exams by the beginning of their final semester. Certain programs require specific core exams be completed prior to the start of their third semester. Consult program requirements for core deadlines. Students should check their program requirements carefully in planning which core exams to take. No M.A. candidate is permitted to take the oral exam until core requirements have been met.

Core exams are given four times a year in September, December, January/February and April/May. In some cases, two versions of the exam are offered. Consult the Registrar's section of the SAIS Web site for the most current information on the dates of exam offerings and the versions offered. Syllabi for the core exams can be obtained on the Academic Affairs section of the Web site.

The failure of a core exam is not officially recorded when no course credit is involved. Although students are required to complete core exams prior to their fourth and/or final semester, they are strongly encouraged to fulfill both core requirements by the beginning of their third semester. Students who fail to pass or fulfill a core exam requirement by the beginning of their final semester will be required to register for the core course for credit.

Core exams that are not taken for credit, but are graded High Pass or Pass (starting fall ’12). Passing grades of High Pass (HP) and and Pass (P) appear on the student's transcript and do not count toward GPA calculations. Students have the option of taking the exam a second time for a higher grade that then replaces the lower grade on the transcript. Students who fail a core exam twice will be required to take the core course for credit. In that situation, the only recorded grade will be the grade received in the class.

3. Core Exam Schedule

4. Getting to the Core (Admissions Blog Post)
Appendix 2 – Core Curricula at Peer Institutions

To serve as a point of reference, this section includes a basic outline of the curriculum for SAIS’s main competitor schools.

Fletcher:

- MALD program
  - Breadth requirement (analogous to “cores”)
    - 2 courses in Diplomacy, History, and Politics (DHP)
    - 1 course in International Law and Organizations
    - 1 course in Economics and International Business,
    - 1 course in Quantitative Reasoning
  - Depth requirement (analogous to concentrations)
    - complete 2 fields of study selected from 19 thematic and regional choices plus a self-designed option
  - Capstone project
- For students planning to pursue a business or quantitative-heavy course load at Fletcher and would like to brush up on key foundational skills, they offer two online preparatory courses.
  - MBA Math: MBA Math has 24 lessons covering basic quantitative skills in finance, accounting, economics, statistics, and spreadsheets.
  - Spreadsheet modeling (through the Harvard online platform)

Georgetown MSFS:

- Program:
  - 5 core courses - 2 econ, 1 history, 1 IR theory, 1 analytical & statistical skills
  - Choose from 3 concentrations or select self-designed/regional & comparative, each requiring 6 classes
  - 5 electives, which can be selected to earn one of 5 certificates
- Masters of Foreign Service offers “co-curricular”
  - Skills clinic: http://msfs.georgetown.edu/academics/cocurricular/clinics/
    - Clinics include (all in-person sessions)
      - Financial Management for Project Managers
      - Writing Winning Proposals
      - Risk Management
      - Presentation Skills
      - Strategy
      - Financial and Non-Financial Modeling
      - Surviving and Thriving in Conflict Zones
      - Career Opportunities and the Job Search for MSFS International Students
  - Leadership activities (and lecture series):
Columbia SIPA:

- Masters of International Affairs (MIA)
  - One Policy Concentration
  - One Specialization
    - This is the skills component of the MIA degree
    - Students can choose to specialize in a skillset or a region
      - Advanced Policy and Economic Analysis (APEA)
      - Applied Science (AS)
      - Gender and Public Policy (GPP)
      - International Media, Advocacy and Communications (IMAC)
      - International Organization (IO)
      - International Conflict Resolution (ICR)
      - Management
      - Regional Specializations
    - Workshops
      - These are required semester-long practicums where students apply skills
    - There are no skills courses or workshops in the way that American, Georgetown, GW or SAIS provide

- Master of Public Administration in Development Practice (MPA-DP)
  - Development Practice Lab
    - Two-semesters
      - 10 workshops taught by guest practitioners from the field
        - Use cases from MPA-DP core courses to train students in skills and techniques
    - First Semester
      - Among the skills that are taught are stakeholder and institutional analysis, problem mapping and causal analysis, geographic information systems, logical framework analysis, and social media, advocacy, and agenda setting.
    - Second Semester
      - In the spring, the main skills taught in the lab are monitoring and evaluation planning, results-based budgeting, cost-benefit analysis, quantitative information gathering, negotiation and trust building, ethics, and working with communities.

GW Elliott School

- Each program includes:
  - Required core courses (9-15 credits) that serve as “fundamentals” or “foundations” for the selected field
For the more academic/theoretical fields, a regional, professional and/or thematic specialization

Or for the more professional oriented fields, analytical requirements

Electives

A capstone, and

1-credit required skills courses

- Sub-fields like international education, international health, technology & science are offered as specialization options across different programs
- Most programs offer flexibility for a self-designed element
- Skills courses
  - Fundamental Skills
    ■ Financial Statement Analysis, Public Speaking, Industry-Specific Writing, etc.
  - Advanced Skills
    ■ Qualitative Analytical & Forecasting Skills, Policy Formulation & Advocacy Skills, Leadership, Teamwork & Management Skills
  - Specialized Professional Knowledge
    ■ Conflict and Corruption: The Resource Curse, Fundraising for Non-Profit Organizations, The Role of an Embassy, etc.

American SIS

- MA in International Affairs
  - Elective Credit Hours can be used for skills institutes
- Skills institutes
  - Institutes are worth 1 credit hour each
  - They must be taken for a grade
  - The cost of a skills course is equivalent to one credit hour
  - Each degree program has their own skills institutes
    ■ Some Examples
      - International Development (Fall 2013)
        ■ Project and Program Evaluation
        ■ Organizational Development
        ■ Gender analysis and development
        ■ Business Development Services
      - International Peace and Conflict Resolution
        ■ Mechanisms for Transitional Justice
        ■ Nonviolent action
        ■ Peace building & Development in Conflict-Affected States

London School of Economics and Political Science:

- MSc International Relations (12 months)
  - Students can choose between a ‘research’ and ‘non-research’ track.
○ 1 core course: either International Politics (historical and theoretical analysis of IR concepts) or International Relations, depending on the track.
○ Final year dissertation
○ 2 electives to be chosen among:
  ■ European integration and political economy courses
  ■ Gender
  ■ Nationalism
  ■ Global Environmental governance and climate change courses
  ■ Diplomacy
  ■ Conflict and peace building courses
  ■ International law
○ Possibility to do a double degree:
  ■ First year at Science Po Paris MSc Affaires Internationales
  ■ Second year at LSE MSc International Relations or International Political Economy
○ A double degree is also available for the MSc European Studies:
  ■ First year at Science Po Paris MSc Affaires Européennes
  ■ Second year at LSE in one of the following: MSc European Studies, MSc Political Economy of Europe, MSc Politics and Government of the EU
  ■ Depending on the choice, students are then required to follow different core course and follow different streams, focusing on EU policy, economic integration, or international relations of Europe.
○ There are no specific economic requirements

● MSc International Political Economy (12 months)
  ○ 1 core course: International Political Economy
  ○ Final year dissertation
  ○ 2 electives to be chosen among:
    ■ History and theory of EU integration
    ■ Turkey
    ■ Chinese foreign and security policy
    ■ Diplomacy
    ■ International Trade
    ■ Politics of Money in the world economy

Science Po Paris
● Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA) programmes (24 months):
  ○ Various master programmes that have different focuses but are all built on the same homogeneous foundation of “international affairs”:
    ■ International Security
    ■ International Public Management
    ■ International Economic Policy
Science et Politiques de l'Environnement (joint with the University of Paris IV)
International Development
Human Rights and Humanitarian Action
International Energy
Journalism and International Affairs
Development Practice

- All students are required to take 5 “fundamental” courses that are considered to be the foundations of international and global affairs.
  - Three foundational courses: international economy, world politics, public international law – two of these must be taken during the first year.
  - Two courses on quantitative methods and management skills.
  - The “skills fundamental” can be waived on a case by case decision.
  - Format: lecture + seminar tutorials

- Two concentrations – students choose a regional concentration and then specialize in a theme within that region:
  - Regional: same as SAIS
  - Thematic: defense and security; diplomacy; emerging economies; global health; environment; global risks; global economic policy; human rights; intelligence; international energy; methods; migrations; project management.
  - Students are required to take at least 1 course per semester per concentration.

- Capstone: the third semester is dedicated to professional development, and students have to undertake an internship. Upon permission, students can also spend the semester studying abroad.
- Knowledge of French is encouraged, and a third of courses are offered in French

Master of Public Affairs (24 months)

- Core courses are taken mainly during the first year. These include:
  - Comparative Politics
  - Economic course: micro, macro, statistics
  - Comparative management
  - Policy analysis

- The second year is devoted to a Capstone project.
- One concentration:
  - Economic and territorial development
  - Human security
  - Global energy and sustainability
  - Trade and economic diplomacy

- 8 electives to be chosen across four semesters, spanning a wide range of subjects from global governance and management, international health, law and democracy, conflicts and negotiations.
- Workshops:
  - Social entrepreneurship
Organizing social movements
Cultural management
Energy and diplomacy in the Caspian region
Diversity in international sport

- Tools courses must be taken for students to gain quantitative skills, and these include trade, public finance, geographic information systems, and advanced policy analysis.
- Students also take a first-year study trip and are required to undertake an internship during the summer between the two years.