SAIS Student Survey: Core Requirements

STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION 2013-2014
COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC AFFAIRS
Background

• In Fall 2013, the SAIS Academic Affairs Department approached the Student Government regarding input on updating certain key aspects of the SAIS core requirements.

• In December 2013, students from the SGA Academic Affairs Committees in both Washington and Bologna met with staff and faculty from the Curriculum and Standards Committee to discuss the current framework and how it might be revised for improvement.

• In February 2014, the SGA Academic Affairs Committees prepared a White Paper that outlined the motivations and general considerations for revising the core curriculum, and provided options for improving the current framework.

• In April 2014, the SGA, in collaboration with faculty and staff, designed and released a student survey on both campuses in order to solicit broad-based input from students on the core curriculum.

• This presentation represents the results of that survey.
Survey Objectives

1. Assess student understanding regarding the objectives of the core curriculum, and whether or not those objectives are being met.

2. Gather information on preferences, motivations, and study methods for different exams for students from different campuses and concentrations.

3. Test recommendations included in the White Paper and solicit new ideas for improving the system.
Survey Response

A response rate of 46% (364 respondents) that is representative of the student body

Current Standing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Years</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Years</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concentration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concentration</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IR/ERE</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR/Strategic Studies</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intl Development</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR/Conflict Management</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH/Latin American Studies</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia/China Studies</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Studies</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR/Intl Law</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East Studies</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR/Global Theory and History</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Foreign Policy</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR/General</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European and Eurasian Studies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia/Southeast Asia Studies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Studies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia/Japan Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia/South Asia Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian &amp; Eurasian Studies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH/Canadian Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bologna</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.C.</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dual Degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dual Degree</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Core Selection: By Exam

The preferred cores are not always the ones that are required

Theories of International Relations (TIR) is required for:
- General IR
- Conflict Management
- ERE
- Global Theory and History
- International Law
- Strategic Studies

Evolution of the International System (EIS) is not required by any concentration, but supports the European and Eurasian Studies comp exams

American Foreign Policy (AFP) is required for:
- American Foreign Policy

Comparative National Systems (CNS) is required for:
- African Studies
- China Studies
- Japan Studies
- Korea Studies
- South Asia Studies
- Southeast Asian Studies
- International Development (Class of 2014 only)
Core Selection: By Campus

Bologna students prefer Evolutions over American Foreign Policy: But SAIS Europe also hosts more European Studies concentrators

Breakdown by Campus
(completed or planning to complete)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bologna</th>
<th>DC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFP</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIS</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIR</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25% of the class in Bologna
Motivations for Core Selection

Motivations for taking non-required cores vary by course

American Foreign Policy
- Prior knowledge in subject: 30%
- General interest: 26%
- Concentration requirement: 13%
- Gap in knowledge: 11%
- Workload: 8%
- Professor: 7%
- Other: 5%

Theories of International Relations
- Concentration requirement: 69%
- Prior knowledge in subject: 12%
- Gap in knowledge: 7%
- General interest: 7%
- Professor: 3%
- Other: 2%
- Workload: 1%

Comparative National Systems
- Concentration requirement: 52%
- General interest: 14%
- Prior knowledge in subject: 12%
- Gap in knowledge: 9%
- Other: 8%
- Professor: 3%
- Workload: 3%

Evolution of the International System
- Concentration requirement: 29%
- General interest: 24%
- Prior knowledge in subject: 17%
- Gap in knowledge: 8%
- Other: 5%
- Workload: 2%

STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
Waiver Exams and Pass Rates

Students take those courses for credit which they are more likely to fail.
Waiver Exams: By Campus

SAIS Europe students are more likely to take most Cores for credit

Breakdown by Waiver Exam or Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course for credit</th>
<th>Waiver exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFP (DC)</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFP (BC)</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNS (DC)</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNS (BC)</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIS (DC)</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIS (BC)</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIR (DC)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIR (BC)</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
Access to Information

Students rely on each other for information and study materials

What was your primary source of information about the core requirements?

- Other students: 39%
- Academic or concentration advisor: 27%
- SAIS external website (sais-jhu.edu): 21%
- SAIS internal website (My JHU or Sharepoint): 7%
- SAIS Redbook: 3%
- Other: 2%
- Facebook: 1%
- SAIS Admissions blog: 0%

How did you study? (Select all that apply)

- Notes/study guides from other students: 25%
- Course lecture notes/slides: 18%
- Course readings: 18%
- Official audit: 12%
- Course review session: 8%
- Blackboard community site: 7%
- Other: 5%
- Unofficial audit: 5%
- Online, instructor-led tutorial: 4%
Sequencing of Core Exams

A significant portion of students wait until their second year to complete cores

Breakdown by Semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>First Semester</th>
<th>Second Semester</th>
<th>Third Semester</th>
<th>Fourth Semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AFP</strong></td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CNS</strong></td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EIS</strong></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TIR</strong></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Studnt Government Association

School of Advanced International Studies
Objectives of the Core Curriculum

The majority of students believe cores are meant to provide baseline/foundational knowledge: But nearly one-third think the current system is failing.

The main objective of the core requirements is to...

- Provide a baseline knowledge for all SAIS students: 78%
- Provide a foundation for the study of IR: 67%
- Satisfy prerequisite knowledge for concentration: 27%
- Prepare us for our careers: 14%
- Don't know/unsure: 7%
- Other: 3%

Do the core requirements meet the objective(s)?*

*Of the first two objectives

No 30%
Yes 70%
What Students Like About the System

A few themes emerged from the open-ended question

1. **Students understand and appreciate the foundation in IR that the cores can provide.**
   - “[The Core curriculum] accomplishes the goal of guaranteeing a minimum knowledge in key areas and provide a common link between different concentrations”

2. **Students value flexibility in meeting the core requirements.**
   - “That all the AFP lectures were available on BlackBoard was a perfect solution: it allowed me to listen to all the lectures (from a highly qualified professor) but not at the expense of other classes I wanted to take”

3. **Specific core courses or professors are particularly popular.**
   - “Theories of IR (in Bologna) provided a good basis for discussion in other classes and as such was hugely relevant to take in the first semester”

4. **Many students welcome an opportunity to take a class outside of their concentration.**
   - “[The cores] forced me to take courses that I otherwise wouldn’t have taken. It allowed me to take a history class which I really liked.”
Main Criticisms

Several criticisms were repeated

1. **The Cores do not provide enough value added.**
   - “I wasn't quite sure why we needed to take them and I didn't feel that they added anything to my SAIS education. The current format of the cores encourages students to simply memorize and regurgitate information, information which students are likely to soon forget.”

2. **The Cores are too broad, too basic, too big, and redundant many students.**
   - “These classes are just mass lectures of the kind one attended freshman year of undergrad. They are impersonal and one-sided. There is no room for debate or discussion. No room for critical thinking.”

3. **The Cores are irrelevant to professional goals.**
   - “[I]t has been my experience that nothing addressed in the core classes is expanded on or revisited in the later classes that you take”

4. **The Cores are not well integrated into other coursework.**
   - “For someone who comes to SAIS mainly for a policy-oriented economics program, the core requirements really detract from that focus and take up two courses that you could have better spent learning more practical and interesting concepts.”
Other Criticisms

Several less common criticisms were also relevant

• A lack of information and communication on the core requirements
  “The biggest challenge is how hard it is to find information or get advice on the cores...When information is limited, it feels as though the administration is not working to promote or clearly communicate the objectives of the cores, which leaves students feeling a bit lost and at times frustrated.”

• Need for standardization: not all students take the same cores, exams vary across professors/campuses

• Subject areas should be modernized: too Western-centric, Cold War focused

• Cores cannot serve as foundation/prerequisite knowledge if they are not completed until 3rd/4th semesters
## Proposed Changes to Core System

The strongest support is for online core courses and practitioner tracks.

Which of the following changes to the core requirements, if any, would you like to see?

*(Select all that apply)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offer a fully online, instructor-led course for all four core areas</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer a &quot;policy&quot; core track and a &quot;practitioner&quot; core track</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designate core &quot;areas&quot; – e.g. all students must take one history class, one theory class, and one practical application class</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow students with backgrounds in core subjects to complete new, more advanced versions of the existing core courses</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equalize standards (e.g. format and grading criteria) across the core and economics waivers</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require an additional skills-based/practical application core</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviate current classes to a half-semester length and require all four be completed</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Suggested Improvements

Students were varied in their personal approaches to improving the cores

1. Offer (condensed) online versions of cores and allow them to be completed during pre-term or over semester breaks.
   • “I did not want to spend graduate-level classes on basic courses like AFP (which I took in undergrad), but I would have taken advantage of a not-for-credit Skills Class in Theories and then taken a very basic waiver exam to ensure I knew the basic concepts.”

2. Teach cores more like seminars to allow more discussion and application, and to ensure the cores are better integrated with the SAIS curriculum.
   • “I think SAIS should either step up and make them more rigorous, interesting and useful classes or scrap them.”

3. Tailor the core requirements to the concentrations
   • “Within IDEV there is a ‘Political Systems of the Developing World’ class, which seems like a much more practical version of CNS. Likewise there is a "US Foreign Policy Toward Latin America Class" which is very similar to AFP, but much more practical for IDEV concentrators. I think IDEV students should be able to substitute these courses for the core, kind of how EES students have Comp exams instead of the core”
Major Findings

The Committee’s analysis of these survey results suggest several key takeaways

• There is a significant appetite within the student body for changing the core system.
• The biggest issue with the cores is a lack of clarity surrounding their objective. This needs to be decided and clearly communicated.
• The core exams should be identical across campuses and have similar failure rates across exams.
• Students are not usually using the cores to fill gaps in their knowledge and will not do so unless it is required.
• Official school resources such as Blackboard, review sessions (live or online), and the website/portal are vastly underutilized by students and should be a priority.
• The Cores cannot serve as a foundation upon which to build further study because too many students wait until their final semesters. Students should be required to complete the cores by the start of their second year.
• All courses should be offered in online form.
• A more practical, skills-based core curriculum should be considered.
Proposed Next Steps

• Present these findings to the full Curriculum and Standards Committee.
• Add “cores” section to new portal.
• Include orientation session on the core curriculum objectives and process.
• Solicit feedback from faculty and staff (E.g., career services) through similar survey.
• Share the results of both surveys with the student body.
• Host a Town Hall-type event to discuss findings with students and outline the way forward.
• Decide on concrete changes to the core curriculum substance and framework.
Thank you from the Academic Affairs Team

• Allison Carragher, Second-Year, Bologna
• Lauren Frederic, First-Year, Washington
• Ignacio Stearns, Second-Year, Washington
• Amber Stewart, Second-Year, Bologna

And a special thanks to Lincoln Fischer and Nathan Kreps for their support and hard work on the survey!

Please contact saissga@gmail.com with any questions