

CAREERS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS¹

Many college students are attracted to the idea of a job in international relations. Such positions are indeed available, but it is more difficult to get into and advance in an interesting career with only a B.A. degree. Either graduate or professional education of some sort, job experience, or both, is often necessary. For some listings of possibilities, see, for example, <http://careerplanning.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=careerplanning&zu=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.wisc.edu%2F%2F> (look under careers & internships at the bottom and then jobs)

1. TYPES OF CAREERS

It is not uncommon for people in international relations to move from one type of career to another, from government to business, for example. Nonetheless, it seems useful to at least sketch the outlines of some of the major alternatives.

1.1 FOREIGN SERVICE (<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/hr/>)

The best-known international career is undoubtedly diplomacy. The lead institution here is the Foreign Service of the United States. This group of about 9,000 people staffs U.S. embassies abroad and the State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA) in Washington. The Foreign Service offers an attractive career, but the selection process is extremely rigorous. Of the approximately 3,000 people who took the exam last year, only several hundred were selected. The examination is interesting and free, so anyone interested should certainly take it, but realistically your chances are slim. The Foreign Service has been concerned about minority and female recruitment over the past few years, and such applications are particularly encouraged.

Entrance is by examination; there are no formal education requirements. The first stage is a written exam that takes all day and uses the format of the SATs and other exams from the Educational Testing Service. Those who receive the required minimum score are invited to participate in the second stage, which is a series of simulations and exercises with other candidates.

The first examination stresses knowledge of the English language, U.S. history, economics, business and culture rather than international relations or foreign countries. Many people think this is odd, but Foreign Service officers represent the United States and will often work with foreigners who have spent a lot of time studying this country; they must know their own history and culture very well. If you are particularly interested in the Foreign Service, make sure you are knowledgeable about U.S. history, literature, and philosophy and have reflected on your work experience. Foreign language competence is required, although not necessarily at entry; nonetheless it makes sense to get it before the exams and can increase your starting salary.

1.2 OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The bulk of people working in international relations in Washington work for agencies other than the State Department. Unfortunately there is no single recruiting device such as the Foreign Service exam for these organizations. The biggest employers are the Defense Department (both military and civilian) and the intelligence organizations, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency, Homeland Security and the National Security Agency.

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Civilians hired by the Defense Department tend to be people with particular specialties; advanced degrees are sometimes required. Given the informal hiring process, actual job experience, which in practice means internships, is very important.

Intelligence careers can be divided into analysts (people who work with secret material trying to decide its significance) and clandestine operators. The Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency both hire junior-level career people on the basis of exams; you should contact each agency separately to see what their current needs and procedures are. They also hire a lot of people with particular skills for analysis, usually with advanced degrees. They seem to be particularly interested in infrequently studied languages (but also Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Russian), geographic areas, mathematics, computer science, and engineering. Again, internships are particularly useful here.

The Agency for International Development (AID) administers U.S. foreign aid and has a fairly large staff. In general they seem to recruit people with technical training in areas like agricultural economics. Their relationship with the State Department changes with each reorganization; if you are interested, you should contact them directly. Smaller organizations include the Export-Import Bank and the Office of the Special Trade Representative.

Many “domestic” executive agencies have international activities or offices; these are often small, but sometimes they offer interesting opportunities. Commerce, for example, is concerned with foreign trade, Agriculture with farm exports, Justice with international legal issues, Treasury and the Federal Reserve with international finance, etc.

The number of people on Congressional staffs concerned with international affairs and homeland security has greatly increased in the past few years. There is no single recruiting process for such jobs; people are selected on the basis of contacts, past experience, and educational qualifications, roughly in that order. Internships are crucial for anyone interested in these sorts of positions.

1.3 THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations is a fascinating (and sometimes frustrating) place to work and it has lots of employees. However, jobs on its permanent staff are allocated on the basis of national quotas, since it is deemed inappropriate to have most jobs held by citizens of one of its members, and therefore it is difficult for U.S. citizens to get hired, especially for positions in New York. Fluency in any two of the UN’s official languages is an important asset.

1.4 THE PRIVATE SECTOR: WASHINGTON

There are a large number of private research groups (often known as the beltway bandits, from their location around the Washington beltway and their dependence on government contracts) and pressure groups of every political stripe in Washington with interests in foreign affairs. Hiring is informal, but many have hired Madison graduates.

1.5 THE PRIVATE SECTOR: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Multinational corporations play a prominent role in current international relations. Most Americans tend to think in terms of working abroad for a U.S. corporation, but in fact there may well be better opportunities working in the U.S., either for a U.S. or perhaps even a foreign firm or bank (of course, that may not be what you think of as an international job).

Americans who are sent abroad are often something of a trial for corporations. They are expensive, have a high failure rate (perhaps as high as 50%), don’t want to stay long, don’t know the language, and get into trouble. Thus most multinationals are moving toward developing indigenous managers and sending abroad only indispensable Americans, usually those with particular technical expertise.

The other side of the coin, of course, is that foreign companies doing business in the U.S. hire lots of Americans. Moreover, an increasing percentage of U.S. corporations do business abroad, so much “normal business” in the U.S. involves international issues. In general, if you want to go into business, you will want to consider a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) degree from the best business school you can get into; this degree and some alternatives are discussed later. If you’re interested in working for a foreign company, knowledge of its language and culture can be invaluable, but it is no substitute for business training. Nobody is going to hire you just because you know the appropriate language; they have to also think you will raise their profits.

Among businesses, international banks have been the most willing to hire people without business degrees; they expect to have to train you regardless of your background. Another alternative is analyzing the political risks of investments in particular countries

1.6 THE PRIVATE SECTOR: NON-PROFIT

There are literally hundreds of private, volunteer organizations, which work, in international affairs; they are so important that they have been awarded the ultimate distinction of their own acronym, PVOs. Some of the PVOs are religious in origin, others are entirely secular. Some are quite large, others are minuscule. They share a lack of direct government control and often are concerned with humanitarian issues. Prominent examples include Crossroads Africa, Oxfam, Catholic Relief Services, and Maryknoll. The U.S. government administers foreign aid through some of these agencies, and they have been prominent in such issues as famine relief in Africa. The PVOs overlap somewhat with private advocacy organizations such as Amnesty International. Salaries are low, but many people find the work extremely rewarding. For a list of such organizations, see: <http://www.interaction.org/index.html> and <http://www.cie.uci.edu/iop/>

1.7 UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OFFICES

U.S. universities serve, among other things, as repositories for international expertise. Faculty work within departments, usually organized around the major disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology and history. Their jobs consist of teaching (communicating skills and knowledge to students) and research (creating new knowledge and communicating it to others). University faculty often have a great deal of freedom in selecting what they will research and teach, enabling them to develop specialized knowledge in a wide variety of areas.

For the past twenty years or so, university teaching jobs have been quite scarce, making it hard to encourage undergraduates to aim toward such careers. However, it now seems likely that in the 21st century there will be increased demand for college teachers as the next baby boom reaches college age and a large number of current college faculty retire. Therefore, college teaching has become a more reasonable career choice for current undergraduates. The only relevant degree for college teaching is the Ph.D.; go to the best university you can get into, and you won’t go far wrong.

The largest Universities have large offices responsible for advising international students (and scholars). Jobs in such offices are available to those with B.A. degrees or Masters in education. (Harvard and Teachers College at Columbia University are among the best places to study international education).

1.8 HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING

International Relations undergraduates, who have enrolled in teaching education programs, are often hired to teach history or, increasingly, international studies programs in high schools (public and private). In preparing for such a profession, it is useful to study more history, economics and geography than might be the norm.

2.0 INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: THE PEACE CORPS (www.peacecorps.gov)

The Peace Corps is an agency of the U.S. government which sends Americans abroad, usually for two years to Central Europe and so-called Third World countries, to help the people of other countries toward economic and social development. Volunteers often work on their own in rigorous physical conditions. Aside from living abroad, Peace Corps people get independent management experience at a very young age. As a result, Peace Corps experience is highly valued by employers hiring for international jobs. The Peace Corps itself also has an extensive network for placing Peace Corps returnees in internationally-oriented jobs in the private and public sectors. While the Peace Corps prefers to recruit students with specialized skills (like agricultural economics) or backgrounds (having grown up on a farm), they have always taken a small number of eager, liberal arts graduates (including Madison College graduates), especially those with prior overseas study and foreign language experience.

3. ALTERNATE EDUCATIONAL TRACKS

There is no single educational path to international jobs; in fact, it's quite common for people in the same position to have very different sorts of educational backgrounds. Moreover, there are a lot of people in interesting jobs with only B.A. degrees (and sometimes without them). However, either graduate or professional education or experience (preferably both) is often essential to get access to these positions. Overseas and advanced foreign language study and an overseas and U.S.-based internationally focused internship are also important additions to job applicants' résumés. A good place to look for help on applying to graduate and professional schools is: <http://www.career.vt.edu/GRADSCH/Applying.htm>

3.1 LAW SCHOOL

A lot of very senior people in international affairs are lawyers, but on balance, law school may not be the most efficient way to start a career in international affairs. Law school is three years of a curriculum that is mostly irrelevant to international relations. It is hard to get into the best law schools, and there is limited financial aid except for loans. (The major exceptions -- for the best students -- are New York University, The University of Chicago, The University of Michigan, and The University of Virginia). The current surplus of lawyers means that law school graduates are having some trouble getting jobs, especially for students who have gone to less highly regarded law schools or graduated low in their classes. (Students who make law review -- no more than 10% of the class -- are still in high demand upon graduation from almost any law school). It's true that you may be able to get an interesting non-legal job with a law degree, since employers figure you must be reasonably intelligent if you have survived law school, but there are other alternatives. If you want to be a lawyer, go to law school. If you don't, think seriously about the alternatives.

There is a good deal of confusion about international law as a career. It is convenient to divide international law into public and private, although this dichotomy is going a bit out of fashion. Public international law is concerned with whether or not the behavior of governments corresponds with international laws, but there are very few institutions that will pay people to do such analysis. The State Department keeps about eight lawyers on staff for this purpose, the Immigration and Naturalization service a good number more, and the U.N. some, but most of the other people in the field teach in universities (probably as many in political science departments as in law schools). To work at the State Department or the UN in this capacity, you must have excelled in one of the best international law programs in the country (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Georgetown or New York University). To teach in a law school, you need to have excelled in law school (probably made law review) or earned a LLM (Masters in Law, which is a research degree) at one of the country's most prestigious and demanding programs.

Most international lawyers are concerned with private international law, how individuals and corporations can carry on transactions within different and sometimes conflicting legal systems. If a tanker registered in Liberia and owned by a company in the Bahamas carrying a load of oil owned by a U.S. corporation hits a Russian submarine and dumps its oil into Belgian beaches, who pays what to whom? Private international law is popular because people and organizations will pay money to get answers to these sorts of questions. This kind of work in turn

sometimes leads to other things; international lawyers often serve as representatives for multinational corporations to the public and governments, a kind of business diplomatic corps. Nonetheless, international law is a fairly minor but growing branch of law, and this is reflected in law school curricula; if you get two international law courses in three years, you will be doing well. Almost every law school in the country will have 2-3 courses; the largest program -- Georgetown -- offers about 15, but you will still only have room in your program for 1-2.

On balance, then, law school is the best alternative for anyone who wants to practice private international law, but you must remember that you have to be a lawyer first and international lawyer second. If you want to study public international law, you may actually do as well in a Ph.D. program in political science specializing in international law, although there are very few places in the U.S. where this is a serious alternative; your career will presumably involve working in a university as a teacher-researcher, either in political science, or less likely, in law school.

There is no pre-law curriculum in the United States; essentially law school will take you regardless of your major if your grade point average, letters of recommendation and LSAT scores are high enough. Extra curricular activities are a plus, but only if you have good grades, recommendations and LSAT scores. Don't sacrifice grades for being involved in yet one more co-curricular or extra-curricular activity. Inasmuch as curriculum makes a difference, they prefer students with broad interest in the liberal arts who have carefully sequenced programs (i.e., courses with prerequisites) and tend to frown on pre-professional degrees. In particular, they recommend that you do not take law courses before you get to law school, arguing that non-law faculty will just teach you incorrectly and that they will have to undo all the damage we have caused. However, anyone interested in law school should consider one course which required intensive reading of cases (like Constitutional Law, General Business Law, and International Law), just to see if you can tolerate it for three years, since that is what you do in law school. For details about the law school application process, see: www.hg.org/students.html. For the home pages of law schools see: <http://washlaw.edu/lawschools/>

3.2 GRADUATE BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Law school is often attractive to students who want to get an "interesting" job but don't want to be lawyers. For such students business school is sometimes a better bet. It takes two rather than three years, it is a little easier to get into a good one, and there are good high paying jobs for new MBA graduates (although for several years there have been rumblings that this market also will be saturated). The jobs aren't limited to corporations either; U.S. business schools teach management, the coordination of people and resources to accomplish a given goal, which is what all large organizations try to do. As a result, government and even non-profit institutions are hiring business school graduates for jobs which, twenty years ago, would probably have gone to lawyers. Most people now assume that MBA graduates, like lawyers, are intelligent, and as a bonus they may even have some useful skills.

Unlike law schools, some business schools have a separate department called International Business. However, these departments are not usually highly regarded within their own schools, in part because they do not rely heavily on econometrics and are therefore thought to be "soft." Moreover, there are relatively few jobs for new MBAs with International Business majors. As explained above, very few young Americans are now sent abroad by corporations. Therefore, you have to get hired by the corporation for your substantive skills; later you can try to develop a special interest in the international side of things. The recommended strategy is to take a double major in a substantive area (marketing, finance, management, etc.) and International Business.

Among the "regular" business schools, (see <http://business.gradschools.com/>) the best by reputation are Harvard, the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, the University of Chicago and Stanford. Northwestern, Columbia and New York University have been cited as the best in international business, and Yale's School of Organization and Management is an interesting attempt to combine training in business and public affairs. Michigan State's Eli Broad School of Management and the Graduate School of Business at the University of Michigan are quite good, with MSU's international strength being in marketing. There are also a couple of programs especially geared to students interested in international business. The American Graduate School of International Management, (AGIM), just outside of Phoenix, more familiarly known as Thunderbird, is one of the few major business schools in the country not affiliated with a university, and it has developed a fine reputation for training high quality personnel in international business. The University of South Carolina business school has

developed a program that requires a foreign (paid) business internship. Both of these programs stress language competence; South Carolina also stresses statistics. Their reputation also attracts recruiters looking for people with these sorts of interests. However, they offer a Masters degree which is not an MBA (AGIM's is a Masters of International Management, MIM and South Carolina's is a MIBA, Masters of International Business), which can be a drawback. Outside of these programs -- and that at the Monterey Institute in California -- an advanced business degree that is not an MBA isn't worth much.

For many undergraduates the major drawback of graduate business school is its heavy reliance on economics and statistics. Anyone interested in business school should take statistics, and microeconomics and macroeconomics (the order doesn't matter) and several advanced economics courses (perhaps international trade and finance) to see how well they do and whether or not they are comfortable with that mode of analysis. An economics major is not necessary for graduate business school, and an undergraduate business degree is usually not recommended. Note that graduate business schools have their own standardized test, the Graduate Management Admissions Test. For details on how to apply and prepare

3.3 POLITICAL SCIENCE GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Every major U.S. university has a political science graduate program awarding a Ph.D. degree, and international relations is a field within almost all these departments. The departments also award a Masters of Arts degree, but this is not particularly useful. Even community colleges are beginning to expect faculty to come with Ph.D.s. The Ph.D. requires two to three years of course work, followed by comprehensive examinations and a thesis, which usually takes another year or two full-time; obviously the time will be longer if you have to go part-time because of limited resources.

The Ph.D. degree is basically a research degree. It is essential for anyone who wants to teach at a college or university, and it is often found among researchers and analysts working for the government and "think tanks" as well. The degree is given in political science; thus while you can concentrate in international relations, you are required to take courses and examinations in other fields as well. Moreover, it takes longer to get than any other option discussed here, and it's not clear that it's worth the extra effort and money unless you are going into college teaching. One group of Foreign Service examiners, when asked how useful graduate school would be, said that the course work would be useful, but that the candidate would do better spending a couple of years in the Foreign Service than working on a doctoral dissertation. Several programs retraining people with Ph.D. degrees to go into business have been fairly successful, but this is a pretty roundabout way to get into business; if that's what you want, try for graduate business school.

A major in political science or international relations is not required for admission to graduate programs in political science, but you should take at least enough courses to decide if you want to do this full-time for a long time; the biggest difference between graduate and undergraduate work is that you have to live with that subject twenty-four hours a day. Admission is usually based on grade point average, Graduate Record Examination (yet another standardized test) scores, and faculty recommendations. In general the best departments are found in the leading universities. If you want more specific guidance, talk to your academic advisor. They will know which programs are more theoretical, more quantitative, stronger in particular area studies, etc.

3.4 INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS SCHOOLS

As noted above, every major U.S. university awards the Ph.D. degree in political science. However, a few universities also have schools or programs centered on a two-year interdisciplinary Masters program in international affairs. Originally these schools were designed to produce candidates for the Foreign Service. However, since so few applicants are accepted and since admission is now by examination, these schools have altered their focus and now try to prepare students to work for other government agencies and for international business as well; Georgetown, for example, renamed its program "International Business Diplomacy."

The curriculum stresses international politics, history, and economics; in addition area specializations are often available. These schools also take placement seriously, an important point to consider. If you're interested in working for the government in international affairs, one of these schools may be your best bet, especially if you haven't done a lot of area studies or foreign language study as an undergraduate. The utility of their degrees in business is more problematic. There is no question that some of their graduates get jobs with major corporations. However, it's less clear if that degree will suffice for a business career or whether people who have gotten jobs with this degree may have to go back to business school later on, much less whether they are better off with these degrees rather than MBAs. The same can be said for those interested in international journalism. Students with a Masters in International Affairs can obtain such positions, but it's probably better to earn a Masters degree in journalism at a fine journalism school (like Columbia, Northwestern and the University of Missouri at Columbia).

There are relatively few institutions specializing in awarding Masters in International Affairs. Two do not specialize exclusively in international affairs but include domestic concerns and they are the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard and the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. The best of the schools that specialize in international affairs are: Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University (near Boston); The Nitze School of Advanced International and Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University (in Washington, D.C.); School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University (New York City); the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University (Washington, DC); and the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.). Somewhere in here is the International Relations Program at Yale, which is much smaller than the others and allows students to essentially custom tailor their educations. On a somewhat lower prestige level are the international affairs schools at the University of Southern California, University of Maryland (strongest in national security studies), American University, the University of Pittsburgh, the Henry Jackson School at the University of Washington, the University of Denver, as well as the Patterson School of Diplomacy at the University of Kentucky.

Another alternative, of course, is to go abroad for a Masters degree, for example, at the London School of Economics (LSE), the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) or the international affairs programs at the University of Kent or the University of Canterbury. Such programs are often quite strong, but the aforementioned placement services (especially for positions stateside) are sorely lacking. On the other hand, if the goal is to use such a Masters as an intermediary step toward a Ph.D. at a U.S. institution, then the arguments become more compelling.