



## International Studies

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To: Deborah Haddad, Assistant Dean (SBS and NMS);  
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From: Marcus Kurtz, Director, Undergraduate International Studies Program

RE: Changes to pre-major language requirements for UISP Bachelor of Arts

August 30, 2019

### **Change to the Pre-Major Language Requirement for the Bachelor of Arts Degree in International Studies**

The Undergraduate International Studies Program has recently undertaken to modify the language requirement that is a pre-requisite for its BA students. From 2012 to 2019, students could fulfill this requirement through the completion of a minor degree in a foreign language. Prior to 2012, this requirement was structured to require the completion of intermediate-level course work in a single foreign language (understood to be two full academic years of study—the equivalent of 1103 plus 1 course). Beginning Summer 2019, these two previous requirements were joined, and students were given the option of fulfilling their language pre-requisite *either* through the completion of a minor, *or* through completion of two years of language study.

We see this as a modest change, and with respect to many languages it implies no change at all in the number of foreign language courses students must take. Of the 14 available foreign language minors at Ohio State, only 7 require language training beyond the two year level outlined above. Indeed, the criterion of requiring two full years of study is both the modal pattern among existing language minors and represents historical practice in International Studies.

### **Justification for the Modification of the Prerequisite**

- The initial implementation of the minor requirement in a foreign language as part of the BA degree might have been useful as a means to increase the level of foreign language competence among International Studies graduates. Unfortunately, however, only a very few minors actually require substantially more foreign language study than did the previous International Studies requirement (two full years). Fully one half have no requirement beyond this level, and a further two require only one additional class. If this

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is the goal, the minor requirement is a very inefficient (and costly in other ways, see below) was to achieve it.

- The utilization of the minor requirement as a prerequisite is exceedingly restrictive. In effect, it requires students to achieve language competence in one of the relatively few minors available at Ohio State. Moreover, the available minors are concentrated in traditional areas that are often quite distinct from the interests and needs of International Studies students. No indigenous languages of Africa or South America are available as minors (though they are available for language study), nor are any languages of hugely-populated and important parts of the world like Indonesia and India represented among the language minors. Thus, while one can minor in Italian, Greek, French, or German which is fantastic if you are a W. European Studies major in Int. Stds., the options are decidedly worse if you are, for instance, a Development major working in Africa or a Security and Intelligence major working in Central, South, or Southeast Asia. The change in the requirement to focus specifically on language study rather than the minor allow students to study the language most relevant to their overall course of study in IS. Even considering offerings at Ohio State alone, this makes it possible for students to focus on any of seven additional languages as part of their course of study. The change also makes it possible to use other universities/study abroad experiences to complete language study in less widely available languages (which are from an employment perspective, especially in the government, extremely useful).
- The minor requirement had malign unintended consequences. International Studies formerly was a very popular component of a double major course of study for OSU students. But the language minor requirement effectively turned this into a requirement for two majors and a minor (unless the second major was a language). Within a few years of the change the number of IS majors that elected to double-major had fallen by half. Similarly, the addition of the minor requirement undermined the timely completion of the degree, making it all-the-more difficult to complete in four years. And double majors became all-but-impossible to complete in a four year window.
- Logistically the inclusion of the minor requirement was also highly problematic. Essentially, advisors in International Studies had to remain fluent in the (oft-changing) requirements of 14 different language minors (in addition to the 11 major and 13 minor tracks within IS itself). This inevitably led to misunderstandings and unfortunate situations with students confused as to whether they had or had not fulfilled all their requirements. Indeed, a variety of language programs over the years have contacted IS to express displeasure at the way in which language minors are advised or enrolled in their programs. This is a complaint I fully understand – the only source of information and action for a language minor should come from the offering department as such. By separating completion of a minor from completion of specific coursework, the advising task at IS is radically simplified and the potential for misadvising students as to the requirements for another program is removed.
- Finally, there is a real issue of intellectual coherence. A large component of most language minors are courses in culture or literature taught in English. These are wonderful courses, but are not properly pre-requisites for an International Studies major. Including them as such in a de facto way via the minor requirement is odd, when myriad other courses that are just as important are treated very differently. The proper place for such courses is within the major requirements themselves—among the options for courses that students use to fulfill their degree requirements. Pending the upcoming external review, curricular reforms will be proposed that seek to do precisely that.