

Educators Consider Alternative Approaches to US College Intelligence Programs^a

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The rise in intelligence studies programs has engendered a spirited debate in academia about the best way to educate future intelligence officers.

Undergraduate academic programs in national security or intelligence began sprouting up at US colleges and universities in the 1990s. They multiplied dramatically following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in response to the heightened need for professionals conversant with terrorism, international crime, cyberthreats, and other geopolitical issues.

The demand for people skilled in these areas has moved beyond the federal government to state and local law enforcement, public infrastructure management, and corporate security departments. In 1985, private sector institutions of higher education offered only 54 intelligence-related individual classes; that number has ballooned to nearly 1,000 today.¹ This surge is a response by US higher education to changing employer needs in the face of geopolitical developments, and represents an expansion resembling the shift toward science and engineering majors after the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, the growth of Russian studies programs during the Cold War, and the proliferation of Arabic language programs after 9/11.

Intelligence has long been a staple of popular entertainment, and the lack of serious scholarly treatment of the field before the 1970s meant that ear-

ly intelligence-related courses were limited to popular themes like “The Anti-hero in Spy Films” or “The Cold War Spy in Fiction.”² As national security issues began appearing more frequently in the news, however, more college students began considering intelligence as a career, and colleges and universities started to supply more serious content.

Mercyhurst College in Erie, Pennsylvania, pioneered the first in-depth intelligence studies program at a civilian institution in 1992 and was alone in that distinction for years.³ Today, more than 100 colleges and universities provide some form of intelligence education.⁴ A 2015 survey found that more than 24 universities have organized their offerings into dedicated intelligence studies programs aimed primarily at developing intelligence analysts.⁵ Almost all of these universities have degree-granting programs in intelligence, most of them leading to a bachelor of arts degree.

According to a comprehensive 2009 study of intelligence education, the programs

- provide students with a uniform set of core conceptual competencies and skills that all those

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involved in national security need to possess;

- educate students about intelligence and national security matters, such as terrorism, cyberthreats, and US international security priorities; and
- help build student and public knowledge about the mandates, strategies, structures, and functioning of intelligence and security organizations in statecraft.⁶ This last aim fills a need identified by

Sherman Kent, the prominent post-World War II intelligence figure who founded *Studies in Intelligence*. Kent observed in the first essay this journal published in 1955 that the intelligence profession’s lack of a “literature” prevented it from ensuring that knowledge about the intelligence business was captured and made accessible to others.⁷

The rise in intelligence studies programs has engendered a spirited debate in academia about the best

way to educate future intelligence officers.^{8,9} Are these new undergraduate intelligence programs meeting the needs of the Intelligence Community (IC) by providing potential new hires with the skills and institutional knowledge needed to “hit the ground running?” Or would students be better served by acquiring deep knowledge in one of the many areas of subject matter expertise of value to the US national security establishment, supplemented by a few familiarization courses on the IC operating environment?



Point	Counterpoint
Undergraduate students majoring in intelligence studies master data-mining, critical thinking, and writing skills within a national security context. They can use this knowledge to quickly assimilate into the IC workforce and provide it with much-needed analytic agility. Such knowledge cannot be obtained by “dabbling” in this field of study.	Undergraduate students majoring in international relations, statistics, nuclear physics, finance, or another relevant field are more appealing to the IC because they provide needed subject matter expertise. These students can gain sufficient familiarity with the IC’s operating environment by obtaining a minor or certificate in intelligence studies.

Point: Critical Skills for Future IC Officers

Undergraduate intelligence studies programs allow students to develop critical thinking, writing, and communication skills within the context of the national security environment to enable them to become more effective IC officers.

First, intelligence is a complex and unique subject that deserves its own academic treatment, particularly to benefit those students who have interest in and intend to apply for positions in the IC. Because academic intelligence studies departments centralize knowledge about the theory and practice of intelligence as a profession, they educate students on the larger issues surrounding national security in addition to producing

future intelligence officers schooled in the roles and responsibilities of analysts, collectors, operations officers, and other IC officers.

Treating intelligence as an appendage to other disciplines would undermine students’ capabilities because the intelligence studies degree provides students with “the time to learn and think about concepts and theories that can be used to provide context for what the analyst does on the job.”¹⁰ The same applies to targeters, cyber analysts, and other IC professionals. With this broader understanding, students are better able to put their subsequent acquisition of subject matter expertise into the proper context to perform as intelligence officers. They can also fill a need for generalist analysts with strong institu-

tional knowledge to allow the IC and private sector to respond more nimbly to national security threats.

Second, the real value in majoring in intelligence is learning, before being hired, how to effectively analyze and synthesize information under the imperfect circumstances—incomplete information, demanding customers, and unyielding deadlines—that characterize the national security operating environment. Intelligence studies programs vary in quality, but the best—like many other well-recognized academic fields—incorporate a wide spectrum of conceptual/theoretical perspectives and subject matter.¹¹ They include learning how to think critically, to identify biases and assumptions, to be resourceful in the collection of data, and to commu-

nicate findings concisely. Their value is in learning to appreciate the art and science of how the intelligence cycle works and becoming proficient with the skills needed to be a successful operator, analyst, researcher, or other professional in the field.

Intelligence majors provide students with four years of work that build and refine their ability to be analytical, self-aware, reflective, insightful, skeptical, and curious, and to think about issues from competing perspectives. For students planning to go into intelligence work, it is preferable to concentrate on developing these skills within the context of coursework in the evolution, structures, functions, activities, ethics, and oversight of the US national security apparatus and classes on critical thinking, writing, and data science.

Acquiring subject matter knowledge—economics, political science, biochemistry—and skills should be a secondary academic track for the intelligence officer, rather than the other way around. One might even argue that it is easier to learn a “hard” skill—like a language—than those skills needed to critically engage information, which a good intelligence

program would teach. In intelligence studies, critical thinking *is* the content, not just a side benefit of learning about other content.

*Third, Gen. Michael Hayden has publicly said that intelligence today is much more than a “tool of statecraft.”*¹² Intelligence minors, certificates in intelligence studies, and ad hoc intelligence classes usually center on the “big” IC agencies, but not all students want to work for the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, or the National Security Agency. Intelligence degree programs have the space to offer concentrations or electives on terrorism, law enforcement intelligence, and cybersecurity to meet the needs of students who want to pursue intelligence jobs at the state and local government levels—such as fusion centers—private corporations’ security operations centers, or industry information sharing and analysis centers.¹³ Forward-leaning programs, like those at Mercyhurst and George Mason Universities, focus on intelligence education’s need to cater to the range of potential employment interests and teach the core critical thinking skills required to be successful across the board.



Counterpoint: Specialized Expertise More Important to IC

The IC would be better served if undergraduate students aiming for a career in national security gave academic priority to obtaining substantive expertise in international relations, statistics, nuclear physics, finance, or another relevant field of study that strengthens the IC’s

knowledge base and research capabilities. The needed expertise is not acquired through intelligence studies programs, although students could benefit from gaining some knowledge of the work environment by taking electives on the US national security apparatus.

First, discussions with hiring advisers suggest that many IC

A Middle Ground? Strengthen IC Majors Rather Than Reject Them

It may be premature to discount intelligence as a major before thoroughly examining how such a major can be best structured and taught. Maybe the question at this juncture is not whether intelligence as a major is viable, but rather what makes a strong intelligence major?

The undergraduate degree programs offered in intelligence studies vary considerably, and not all offer classes on writing and critical thinking. It could be that existing intelligence programs need to better calibrate the substance of the required and elective courses offered, internship opportunities, and faculty balance between practitioners and academics in order to find the balance that produces graduates who are competitive in any of the intelligence realms to which they apply.

For example, according to a 2013 study, nearly 70 percent of the faculty teaching classes in intelligence studies programs have had intelligence work experience.¹⁴ These former intelligence officials offer valuable insight but often lack the broader understanding of the history of intelligence, the policy and legal environments within which the IC operates, and the ethical issues surrounding the pursuit of intelligence that can be provided by more academically trained professors and a cohort of intelligence studies Ph.D. scholars.

agencies prefer hiring candidates for analytic, collection, and operations positions who have a deep knowledge of global issues, hard sciences, and language skills. This preference is largely a matter of opportunity costs. Now more than ever, the geopolitical environment demands intelligence officers who have expertise in specific subject areas, including languages. A

student majoring in intelligence is not majoring in Chinese, nuclear physics, international finance, biochemistry, or any number of substantive fields that are needed by the intelligence agencies. The desired qualifications listed for analytic, targeting, and collection positions on the CIA's website show a strong bias toward subject matter degrees rather than intelligence studies. Most IC analysts who have made it through the rigorous hiring process have degrees in the social sciences and humanities—valued for the broad outlook and perspective on the world they provide students.¹⁵ Science and engineering graduates are prized for their particular niches of knowledge that intelligence agencies need.

Second, students can best develop the critical thinking and cogent writing skills that are essential for success in intelligence within a rigorous academic program that mandates a deep exploration of the student's academic major. Any rigorous academic program that teaches students to select and evaluate disparate sources, to engage in critical thinking, to come to a conclusion with incomplete knowledge, and to construct a reasoned argument will help prepare that student for intelligence work. But how much better if that rigorous program is done in a substantive field? The IC needs people who have deep knowledge of foreign cultures, foreign leaders and politics, and foreign weapons systems, so that these intelligence officers can provide insights to US policymakers.

Third, too many intelligence degree programs are designed and run by academics with little practical experience in the intelligence profession, although many adjunct staff have intelligence backgrounds. The

programs focus on broad theories of intelligence and process-oriented knowledge but not on the deep subject matter knowledge needed to put rapidly moving events and limited data into context for policymakers as actionable intelligence. For that reason, the intelligence agencies prefer to teach the “how to” of intelligence analysis to new employees. Since 2000, CIA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence have all developed in-house “schools” to train employees in the craft of intelligence, and, like other crafts, mastery is gained through practical experience. Some of the smaller US intelligence agencies may find graduates of intelligence degree programs effective employees, at least for the short term, but even these smaller agencies would do better to emphasize subject matter expertise as well as critical thinking and writing.

Last, intelligence degree programs shortchange both students and the IC by not giving either what they need. The programs are popular but fail to deliver a demonstrable hiring advantage while dissuading students from majoring in something that would offer a better chance of a successful intelligence career. One veteran CIA instructor said that new hires who had majored in intelligence do not stand out from their contemporaries.¹⁶ Probably for this reason, when CIA recruiters visit campuses, they seldom list “intelligence studies” as a degree of interest to the agency. Moreover, the programs put at risk the future prospects of students who do not make it through the IC's highly selective hiring process because their deep knowledge of the national security environment does not easily transfer to other careers.

That said, some CIA recruiters have observed that most young people applying for intelligence positions do not have a solid background in what intelligence is, what it does, how it developed in the United States, and what its limitations are.¹⁷ Newly minted intelligence officers do not know as much about their new profession as they should, which has led a few to leave CIA service early as they chafed against the national security operating environment. Needless to say, US intelligence agencies do not want their new employees to be wholly uninformed about intelligence.

To correct this shortfall, college students intending to go into the intelligence field would benefit most from a “Goldilocks” or “just right” program that provides some education of the intelligence profession without supplanting the study of those disciplines that help intelligence officers

A Happy Medium? The Intel Minor

Is higher education moving from one extreme—treating intelligence issues as an afterthought in national security or US history programs—to another with the idea of intelligence as its own major? Is the happy medium offering a minor in intelligence studies in conjunction with an undergraduate degree in a more substantive field such as statistics, data science, international affairs, or microbiology? A typical minor or certificate in intelligence studies would be 15 to 18 credit hours and include courses on the history of intelligence, contemporary issues in US intelligence, intelligence analysis techniques, and electives encompassing a wide range of issues pertinent to intelligence, such as the psychology of terrorism, data security, counterintelligence, and criminal justice.

understand the world. One such approach would be developing a minor in intelligence studies. The minor can be strengthened through significant involvement by former intelligence officers with academic credentials, to provide students with the knowledge

they need about intelligence collection, analysis, counterintelligence, and covert actions, as well as the accountability of intelligence that our democratic system requires. Active and former senior officials from CIA, NSA, and the State Department's

Bureau of Intelligence and Research have echoed intelligence scholar Mark Lowenthal, himself a former assistant CIA director, who has said, "Intelligence can be a minor; it must never be a major."¹⁸



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Endnotes

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