

Should I be an IR major?

There are four considerations that most students think about in choosing a major: (1) Do I enjoy the classes in the major, (2) Can I get a good job with this major, (3) What skills will I develop in this major, and (4) How much time will the major take and how difficult will the classes be. Here is a brief discussion of how the IR major stacks up against other majors on each of these considerations.

1. Enjoyment

Obviously this varies from person to person. If you don't already know whether you will enjoy the political science or economics classes that are at the core of the IR major, a good strategy is to take one of them and see what you think. Take Econ 110; take one of the intro political science classes, and you will get a sense of how likely you are to enjoy the other classes in the major. If you enjoy your major classes, you will do well in them, and that alone will likely enhance your job prospects. We do better in the classes that we are interested in, and if we do better in those classes, we look better as possible job candidates to future employers. Also, it is simply a lot more interesting and fun to study something that we are passionate about and interested in.

2. Job prospects

There are very few majors that lead directly to a specific type of job. Accounting majors become accountants; nursing majors become nurses; engineering majors become engineers. Most other majors, though, are not like this. English majors do not typically become writers. History majors don't typically become historians. French majors don't typically become interpreters, and philosophy majors don't typically become philosophers. Thus, it may seem that IR (and many other majors) is not a good choice for getting the best kind of job. This statement, though, is wrong. The easiest way to see the error in this statement is to consider the majors of people working in specific jobs. If you interviewed 100 FBI agents and asked them their undergraduate majors, you would probably find 50 different majors in that group. If you interviewed business executives and asked their undergraduate majors, you would find some business majors but also some Spanish majors, some communications majors, some sociology majors, etc. In fact, most jobs are filled from a wide range of undergraduate majors. There are no one or two majors that work best for the typical types of jobs that students get after graduation.

Nevertheless, some majors communicate important information about the skills that you have as a graduate. For example, economics, statistics, math, computer science, and engineering majors signal to a potential employer that you have excellent quantitative skills. Russian, Korean, German, and Portuguese majors, for example, also communicate that you have excellent language skills. In contrast, political science, history, psychology, and family life, for example, do not convey any specific information about your training, rather than a generic understanding that you have completed a social science or humanities degree. At most other universities, an international relations major is typically a version of a political science major. At BYU, however, our IR major is essentially a double major in political science and economics with something close to a minor in a language. Recruiters who come to BYU or who have hired IR majors in the past know this, and they think very highly of the training that you receive as an IR major. If you are talking to someone who isn't familiar with the IR major at BYU, you need to explain simply to them that IR at BYU is essentially a double major in economics and political science with a minor in a language. When they look at your transcript, they will immediately understand what you are saying.

3. Skills acquired

Rather than choosing a major based on the reputation of the name of the major generally, it is likely more effective to choose a major based on specific skills that you will acquire or enhance in that major.

IR combines three important skills that all employers value: quantitative analysis, writing, and a language. These are really the three most important skills that potential employers value. IR is the best option to do all three skills in one major. You can get these three skills other ways, for example, you can double major in history (writing) and statistics (quantitative) and minor in Japanese. However, IR is the best, prepackaged grouping of these three important skills, and it takes much less time to acquire these three skills in one major (IR) than it does to try to cobble together other majors and minors to get the same set of skills.

However, if you don't want to get these three skills, then you shouldn't major in international relations. You shouldn't force yourself to do something that is unpleasant for you to do just to get a certain set of skills. If you aren't interested in learning a language, then you shouldn't major in international relations. Similarly, if you don't want to do the writing and analytical thinking emphasized in political science, then you shouldn't choose to be an IR major.

4. Time and Rigor

International relations is not an easy major. The classes are demanding, and you will learn a lot in them. If you would like to take easier classes, there are many other options at BYU. It is surprising, though, that the two classes with the highest time commitments (as reported on student evaluations) in the major are the two classes that graduating students say that they liked the best and were the most valuable to them. Perhaps it is misguided to choose a major or courses simply based on the courses that take the least amount of work and are the easiest to complete.

International relations also takes a lot of credits to complete (because it is essentially a double major with a minor.) If a student tests out of most of the language classes, the major takes about 60 credits, which is two full years of coursework. If a student starts with the first language classes, then the major takes about 86 credits, or a little bit less than three years of coursework. In contrast, an economics major takes about 37 credits, and a political science major takes about 44 credits. These and other majors make it possible to graduate quicker than if you choose the IR major. It is, however, important to note that a double major in political science and economics can take up to 80 credits when getting the same skill set through the IR major only takes about 60 credits.

Perhaps your decision about which major to choose will be determined by the length and the rigor of the major. Perhaps your decision will be driven by which classes seem most interesting to you. None of these are bad or unimportant considerations in deciding on what major to choose. It is perhaps a good idea, though to give greater weight to the skills that you will acquire and how interesting the courses are to you when choosing a major. Considering the skills acquired will likely include the also important considerations of career options that come from your choice of a major.

Finally, it is important to note what careers IR majors typically do. About a quarter of IR majors go to law school. About a quarter go into business, maybe returning to school later to earn an MBA. About a quarter go into some type of government work (state department, FBI, state government, Department of Commerce, national security agencies, etc). The final quarter do other jobs: non profits, education, police, etc.