
Major or Minor?: For What Audiences are Intelligence Studies Programs Best Suited

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Major or Minor?: For What Audiences are Intelligence Studies Programs Best Suited

Abstract

Intelligence and security studies degree programs at non-government universities offer a variety of diplomas, from bachelor's degrees, to graduate certificates, to master's degrees. In most cases, universities market intelligence studies degree programs to two audiences: those who aspire to a job in a security-related career (intelligence, law enforcement, or homeland security); and those already in one of those careers who want to improve their qualifications for career advancement. This article proposes three additional audiences—intelligence scholars, students seeking to improve critical thinking and analytic skills, and any informed student—that would also benefit from such degree programs, with each requiring a different combination and weighting of competencies, thus necessitating a different level of emphasis in an intelligence degree program.

Introduction

Intelligence and security studies degree programs at non-government educational institutions offer a variety of diplomas, from graduate certificates to bachelor's and master's degrees, and in a few cases doctoral degrees. A recent search found at least 28 such universities in the United States alone. At least seven universities in the UK offer intelligence-related degrees and similar programs appear in other countries, such as Norway, Romania, and South Africa.

For whom are university intelligence studies programs intended and whom do the programs benefit the most? The answers to these questions may not be the same. In most cases, universities market intelligence studies degree programs to two audiences: Students who aspire to a job in a security-related career (intelligence, law enforcement, or homeland security), and practitioners already in one of those careers who want to improve their qualifications for career advancement. These audiences stem partially from the creation of the Intelligence Community (IC) Centers for Academic Excellence (IC CAE) Program in 2005, which spawned intelligence studies programs in universities across the United States specifically designed to recruit new IC employees. However, are there other audiences that might benefit from a similar curriculum?

An increasing body of literature is forming around the question of intelligence education, focusing on what intelligence studies programs convey and what they should be considering, including an entire special issue of the journal *Intelligence and National Security* in 2017 dedicated to teaching intelligence. This literature comes partially from those who have practiced intelligence themselves, and partially from others who are looking at intelligence from the outside. Although intelligence professionals tend to look condescendingly at academics who have not spent time in the IC, intelligence agencies are not the receptacles of all knowledge, and outside perspectives, if well informed, can provide valuable insights to the intelligence profession.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer-turned university professor, Nicholas Dujmovic, described two opposing perceptions of non-government intelligence education. On one hand, new CIA employees arrived at the agency ignorant of what intelligence is, how it works, and

how it has developed in the United States. Their university education gave them no knowledge of the intelligence world, and at times that ignorance leads to quick disenchantment in new employees. On the other hand, the proliferation of degree programs focusing on intelligence has done little to support intelligence employers. Dujmovic asserts, “U.S. intelligence agencies also don’t want new hires to have majored in intelligence.”¹

This article explores the reality of the promises to serve the two audiences of intelligence studies degree programs and posits several other audiences that could benefit from them. In so doing, it proposes broad curriculum areas that align with an audience to identify the optimum target for each and posits which audience would benefit from an intelligence major versus an intelligence minor. Based on qualitative observations, this analysis will hopefully prompt interest in a more empirical approach in the future.

Competency Typologies

Several scholars have created typologies to describe the knowledge that intelligence personnel need to be successful. In 2003, Marrin described three categories of knowledge that CIA analysts needed to fulfill their missions: Regional expertise, meaning expertise in a region of the world or technical topic; procedural expertise, including the tradecraft of performing the intelligence analysis function; and disciplinary expertise, meaning an analyst’s assigned subtopic, such as political, military, economic, and leadership analysis.² Coulthart and Crosston divide the body of knowledge differently into core knowledge, which addresses the organizational, historical, and ethical content areas of intelligence; procedural knowledge, in which students learn how to use specific analytic methodologies and critical thinking skills; and domain knowledge, meaning the domain in which an aspiring student prefers to work (intelligence, law enforcement, or business intelligence). Into this third category also falls an understanding of the threats that are unique to that domain, along with methods to mitigate them.³

In 2013, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) sponsored a study that identified a four-level typology of competencies required for employees to work at NGA. The typology listed personal effectiveness characteristics at the base, followed by academic and workplace competencies, including broad subjects like geography, reading, and

communication and computer skills. Industry-related technical competencies, like using geospatial intelligence systems and manipulating geospatial data, built on that competency foundation, followed finally by occupation-specific competencies at the apex.⁴

The researcher modified these typologies to create three clusters of competencies that any intelligence professional needs to be successful, resembling most closely the top three competencies in the NGA study. That expertise in part overlaps with the expertise needed by any successful academic, but the overlap is incomplete, and some expertise is unique to the intelligence profession. Consequently, students accumulate some of the knowledge more effectively after they have begun a career in an intelligence agency, not before. The three revised categories are foundational, disciplinary, and process oriented.

Three Clusters of Competencies

Foundational competencies

Foundational competencies are the non-intelligence topics that most intelligence agencies are seeking in prospective employees, which any serious student could obtain at a high-caliber university. Foundational competencies include understanding a region or technical specialty, including the threats that exist in that domain. They also include general communication and research skills that convey information clearly orally and in writing, that answers the right question at the right time in the right form.

The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Analysis jobs website begins by listing traits that the agency particularly values: Curiosity, integrity and personal fortitude, teamwork, and intellectual humility. The NGA study noted above identified a similar list of basic personal effectiveness characteristics, including interpersonal skills, integrity, professionalism, initiative, dependability, and lifelong learning.⁵ A prospective employee acquires these characteristics over a lifetime, and they apply to any career.

Beyond personal effectiveness characteristics, DIA further indicates, “we are particularly interested in candidates with backgrounds in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, like computer

programmers, data scientists, and engineers.”⁶ DIA’s summer internship program, which provides undergraduate and graduate students an opportunity to experience DIA, is “focused on skills that are critical to DIA, such as foreign area studies, legal, computer science, business administration, human resources, public administration, international relations, political science, chemistry, physics, biology, microbiology, pharmacology, toxicology, engineering, or intelligence analysis related courses.”⁷ Although intelligence-related courses do appear, they are last on the list and follow a long list of foundational competencies. NGA requires a broad spectrum of what the NGA study calls core areas, including geography, remote sensing, and competence in geographic information systems, and specialized knowledge in cartography, geodesy, geophysics, or photogrammetry. Graduates in some of these fields, like cartography and photogrammetry, are rare, making it difficult for NGA to find the right people.⁸

Foundational competencies can also include general skills that allow an individual to evaluate information and think independently, yet critically. This includes the ability to separate fact from fiction and to evaluate research sources. The demand for these competencies is not unique to intelligence agencies—graduates who possess these skills can find work in many careers. However, intelligence agencies highly value foundational competencies in entry-level employees, as agencies can build on them to develop deeper specialization in intelligence-specific fields.

Disciplinary competencies

Disciplinary competencies are those that are specific to the intelligence field. They include knowledge of intelligence history, including past intelligence failures and successes and the drivers behind them; the structure and functions of intelligence agencies; the limits and advantages of intelligence collection disciplines; the intelligence cycle and the intelligence collector-producer-customer relationship; the ethics of intelligence; and the role of intelligence in a democratic society.

Dujmovic lists five broad categories of intelligence-related competencies: Collection, analysis, counterintelligence, covert action, and accountability (as it relates to the previous four).⁹ He refers to these competencies when he notes the opportunity costs of intelligence studies programs in

comparison with foundational topics. He says, “a student majoring in intelligence is not majoring in Chinese, or nuclear physics, or international finance, or biochemistry, or any number of substantive fields that are highly valued by the intelligence agencies.”¹⁰ A team of professors from King’s College London and the Norwegian Defence Intelligence School describe a different way of presenting disciplinary competencies, dividing them into four perspectives: Historical, functional, structural, and that of the decision maker.¹¹ Some of these topics are difficult to cover at an uncleared academic institution. There is much about intelligence collection capabilities, for example, that is not publicly available. However, much scholarship is available that can be used to teach most of these topics.¹²

Process-oriented competencies

Process-oriented competencies are those needed to function successfully in a specific intelligence job, and may include the technical aspects of writing, editing, and presentation in a particular agency’s style; an agency’s roles, missions, customers, rules, procedures, and formats; intelligence and counterintelligence operational methods; or the processes for operating a specific collection system. For example, according to Marrin, CIA’s intelligence analysts require an understanding of their role within the foreign policy process, tools that help them structure and analyze complicated issues, a theoretical framework to approach an issue from a specific topical perspective, such as political or economic analysis, and the presentation skills necessary for busy policymakers to incorporate into their decision making process.¹³ Process-oriented competencies build on both the foundational and disciplinary competencies. However, they are difficult to cover at an academic institution because of the parochial expectations of individual agencies are best learned at a specific agency after a person is hired and on the job.

Five Audiences

Based on those three clusters of competencies, this article offers a view on the various audiences of intelligence studies programs, and how those three clusters of competencies map to them. Each requires a different combination and weighting of competencies, thus necessitating a different

level of emphasis on intelligence-related curriculum. The five proposed audiences are:

- Aspiring intelligence professionals
- Incumbent intelligence professionals
- Scholars seeking to describe and develop a better understanding of the history, philosophy, successes, and failures of intelligence
- Any student seeking to improve critical thinking and analytic skills, regardless of career aspirations
- Any student who wants to understand the role of intelligence in the context of broader international security and political affairs

As noted above, the first two audiences are most often the targets for intelligence studies degree programs. Universities sometimes mention Audience 3 as a target audience—particularly in the UK—although it is controversial, with academics and practitioners disagreeing on its value. Audience 4 is beginning to grow in prominence and Groups 3 and 4 may be the best arguments for maintaining intelligence studies degree programs in non-government institutions. Often overlooked, Audience 5 also offers value by creating a more informed public on the topic of intelligence.

Aspiring intelligence professionals

Many intelligence degree programs claim to teach skills that will attract potential intelligence employers. The website for Fayetteville State University's bachelor's degree in intelligence studies states:

What will you do? You will get hired for a variety of jobs by agencies, such as Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, Drug Enforcement Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigations, National Security Agency, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Energy (Nuclear Related Intelligence), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, and U.S. Department of the Treasury.¹⁴

The University of Pittsburgh similarly states, "Our program prepares students for careers in the security or intelligence fields with various think tanks or intelligence agencies, such as the FBI or CIA."¹⁵

However, the assertion that an intelligence studies degree program could prepare a student for potential employment in an intelligence career is problematic. A survey of positions advertised in the Office of Personnel Management career code for intelligence specialist, 0132, indicates that many of them favor intelligence experience rather than intelligence education. Many require current affiliation with a particular organization or prior experience in the profession, such as an intelligence-related military career. If a student has these experiences, that often meets the minimum qualification regardless of education, and many of these jobs do not list an educational qualification requirement at all. An intelligence degree is less likely to help an aspiring student to qualify for these jobs.

What is more beneficial, as DIA's website notes, are foundational competencies, like knowledge of an area of the world, a foreign language, or even better, expertise in a technological specialization, like computer science, engineering, or biological sciences. NGA looks for degrees that provide the ability to analyze the world and its features. For these agencies, foundational competencies are a higher emphasis than disciplinary competencies. That does not entirely eliminate the desire for basic intelligence-specific knowledge, which at least prevents the surprises that Dujmovic described new intelligence employees facing. However, those competencies are most often expected to have come from past employment experience, not an intelligence studies degree. They might also be supplied in part by an undergraduate intelligence studies minor.¹⁶

Incumbent intelligence professionals

This audience needs skills that will advance an already established intelligence career. There is an inherent difference between obtaining an entry-level job in an intelligence agency and preparing for promotion while already working in an intelligence agency. Consequently, the competencies that an incumbent employee needs are not the same as those of an aspiring employee. This audience is the one that most benefits from process-oriented competencies, but an employee acquires them at work in an intelligence agency, not in a university setting. These competencies are on the boundary of education and training, with education providing the cognitive construct for interpreting a topic, and in-house training

providing the nuts-and-bolts skills for how to work in the field, often referred to as tradecraft.

According to Marrin, prior to the establishment of the Kent School at CIA, the CIA analyst training process usually relied upon the analyst's prior formal education, combined with an initial period of sink-or-swim adaptation to a CIA analytic organization.¹⁷ The Kent School became the CIA's in-house institution for conveying process-oriented knowledge. Marrin further notes that by February 2002, the CIA's Career Analysis Program had taught "newly hired analysts about the CIA's and the DI's history and values and develops the basic skills essential to an intelligence analyst's successful career in the directorate."¹⁸ In other words, the CIA took new employees who possessed foundational competencies and gave them process-oriented training, with a mix of disciplinary information.

Many university intelligence studies programs try to supply these competencies, but intelligence agencies place little value in them unless the agency has trained the student itself. Marrin notes, "Training programs in general, provide information specific to the needs of the institution, and different institutions within the government foreign policy process use training programs to bolster their unique informational needs."¹⁹ This is true for any agency, the missions of which are different from any other agency. No single standard for process-oriented skills applies across all intelligence agencies. Governments have established educational and training institutions for this purpose, such as National Intelligence University, CIA's Kent School, DIA's Academy for Defense Intelligence, the Norwegian Defence Intelligence School, and King's College London 10-week intelligence analysis course.²⁰ A team of German scholars proposed a similar government-sponsored program for German intelligence analysts in 2016.²¹

Although non-government university academic programs claim to provide this knowledge, none convey the process-oriented information that an individual agency requires in its employees. Consequently, process-oriented competencies within a university context are the least likely to benefit the student, unless the student is already working in an intelligence career, and the student's agency recognizes the value of the university courses.

Additional Audiences

The first two audiences are primary targets of many existing university intelligence studies degree programs, even though they may not be best suited for either. With these two audiences in mind, and primarily in the context of the CIA, Mark Lowenthal, wrote, “Intelligence can be a minor; it must never be a major.”²² However, a major in intelligence studies, or a major that conveys intelligence-related competencies, may benefit three other audiences even more than the first two.

Intelligence scholars

This audience goes beyond the practical to the theoretical. Students in this audience approach intelligence as a field of academic inquiry and create theories relevant to intelligence activities. Practitioners typically have little time for theories and focus instead on the day-to-day delivery of intelligence to decision makers; as Marrin puts it, unlike academics, the intelligence analyst does not create theory.²³ Academics approach intelligence from historical, philosophical, and ethical perspectives, seeking answers to the questions of why governments rely on intelligence and how it fits into democratic societies.

A search of the British Library’s eThOS database, a repository of PhD theses completed at UK universities, reveals a variety of theses on intelligence topics, such as intelligence history, intelligence sharing relationships, the role of intelligence in society, and the application of technology to intelligence and security problems. These are often further disseminated in the form of scholarly articles and academic books and are thus made accessible to a broader audience. Several scholarly publishers, such as the Edinburgh University Press and Georgetown University Press, have specialized book series that cover intelligence-related topics. These works, often by noted intelligence studies professors, only some of whom have served careers as intelligence practitioners, offer a depth of knowledge about intelligence and its workings, and should inform the activities of intelligence services worldwide. University degree programs that yield these works may or may not have the word intelligence in their program title. However, they benefit from the merger of the foundational and disciplinary categories of competencies, as they join a deep

understanding of the world with specialized knowledge about the role intelligence plays in it.

This is a controversial audience. Some intelligence professionals condescendingly dismiss the capabilities of non-intelligence academics to understand the real world of intelligence. Dujmovic epitomizes this condescension with his analogy of the Bulgaria problem: People analyzing Bulgaria who know nothing about country or its language and have never been there. He claims that the only way to know Bulgaria is to go there and experience it for one's self, just like the only way to know intelligence is to have worked it. He continues that, because of this problem, academic treatment of intelligence is "almost always facile, shallow, or spotty, and sometimes it's actually sophomoric."²⁴ He assumes that to understand intelligence, one must have "held a security clearance, worked overseas in an official capacity (which means living under cover), crafted a written product for policymakers based on all-source analysis, recruited or run an asset, made sense of imagery or signals intelligence, or briefed a policymaker."²⁵ Put another way, if you never worked for the CIA, you know nothing about intelligence.

Some intelligence insiders miss the fact that those who brief policy makers make up only a small portion of intelligence professionals. It is more likely that an intelligence professional has briefed a joint task force commander than a senior policy maker. Additionally, Dujmovic assumes that the group he derisively labels the "intelligence professoriate" is ignorant of reality because "they have no access to the voluminous and detailed classified information they would need to make such judgments (and often they seem unfamiliar with the huge amount of former intelligence secrets that have been released)."²⁶

As early as 1993, Ernest May, the renowned political historian, told a CIA audience, "Scholars who work on history, politics, or methodology of intelligence agencies need to address more often and more explicitly questions as to the influence of intelligence on choices made by governments and, more broadly, on currents in international politics and the world economy."²⁷ Since then, government have made available huge volumes of previously classified information to allow researchers to do just that. Academics willing to do serious archival research can hardly claim to

lack data on intelligence topics. One only needs to visit the CIA's own Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room to see that.²⁸

The UK and Australian intelligence communities seem to have embraced academic scholarship of intelligence by commissioning official histories of MI5, the Secret Intelligence Service, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the General Communications Headquarters, and a 3-volume history of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).²⁹ The volumes all feature prominent historians, most of whom have never been intelligence professionals, to whom the agencies provided access to previously unpublished records. The exception among these authors is John Blaxland, the author of two of the three ASIO history volumes, who served as an Australian intelligence officer before becoming a historian.

United States intelligence agencies have tentatively allowed academics to write histories, although the CIA has relied primarily on its internal history staff, not outside historians. One exception to that occurred in 1992, when the U.S National Archives and Records Administration sponsored the publication of an edited volume of essays on the Office of Strategic Services in World War II.³⁰ Many of the essay authors were never intelligence professionals. Rather, several were historians who analyzed intelligence and covert operations within the military and political context of World War II. The essays contain insights from declassified archives that reveal struggles that intelligence and covert organizations were facing during World War II. Some of these challenges still exist today, such as interagency rivalries, foreign liaison challenges, and success obtained only through collaboration and cooperation.

While not all academics produce valuable intelligence scholarship, a purely academic perspective is no more a guarantee of bad scholarship than experience as a field operator is a guarantee of good scholarship. Crosston similarly argues that scholars of other topics, such as Congress and diplomacy, can produce valid research without having worked in intelligence fields.³¹ An intelligence studies major geared for scholars to lay the groundwork for further research would only raise the probability of success and benefit both the scholar and the intelligence profession.

Student seeking to improve critical thinking and analytic skills

Employees in many environments can apply the cognitive skills that help intelligence analysts succeed. This is especially true in the business world, where intelligence about the market, competitors, and the interaction between them can translate to gains or losses. While the gains and losses are of a different sort than those with which national security decision makers grapple, businesses could learn much from how the national security community operates.

Although prominent national-level failures have sometimes led to public derision of intelligence analysts, those same analysts achieve quiet successes daily, not just at the national level, but also across the whole decision maker spectrum, from the tactical to the national. An audience of students seeking critical thinking and analytic skills could benefit from the knowledge encompassed by the disciplinary competencies, like analytic techniques, communicating analytic conclusions, and the ethics of intelligence, applying and adapting them to a business, government, or other settings. It is to this audience that the intelligence profession can export its vast knowledge for the benefit of the broader community.

Some intelligence studies degree programs have begun to embrace this audience, especially since intelligence services are often not the best fit for their graduates. The University of Buckingham in the UK boasts, “Among our alumni we have a graduate who became the head of his country’s civil service and one who became a leading Formula One motor-racing driver. Another secured a position as the Minister of Sabah and one female law graduate became the first British lawyer to become a French Advocate.”³² Similarly, Brunel University London includes non-intelligence careers in its promotional pitch: “Private sector opportunities are especially strong in analytical functions for the banking, resources, and risk and security sectors.”³³ James Madison University’s website cites *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as stating that most employers were looking to hire people with “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems” as well as having “ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning.”³⁴ All those skills fit within an intelligence studies major that conveys disciplinary competencies.

Any informed student

The last audience is the broadest. It can include any student in any university who would benefit from understanding intelligence in a general sense. It would profit the IC to encourage all students to develop an understanding of the role of intelligence in society and the historical successes and failures of intelligence—in other words, disciplinary competencies—especially emphasizing students in political science, international relations, international business, area studies, and other related majors. Knowledge gained in these courses would equip students to interpret the conflicting information disseminated publicly about intelligence and national security. These courses would not lead to a full degree, but rather universities could group them into a minor or simply offer an elective for any student to fulfill a general education requirement.

The need for better public understanding of intelligence became clear in 2016, when allegations of Russian intelligence interference in United States state-level election systems arose. A general knowledge of how intelligence services operate would have served employees in those state governments well. State employees were not going to become intelligence operators—that would not have been helpful. However, as the Department of Homeland Security approached states to present warnings about Russian malign activities, state employees with a general knowledge of intelligence could have more effectively interpreted and put into context the information they were receiving.³⁵

Conclusion

Table 1 summarizes the five audiences of intelligence studies programs and the competencies most applicable to each audience. A degree in intelligence studies or a related field such as security or war studies will probably provide some advantage for generalist, entry-level positions in the intelligence field. It would be less helpful in fulfilling the requirements of a technical or specialized intelligence job, nor would it likely help to qualify for a job above entry level. Those jobs require specific skills or experience, which intelligence studies academic program do not provide.

Table 1. Summary of Intelligence Studies Audiences and Their Emphases

	Foundational	Disciplinary	Process-oriented
Aspiring intelligence professionals	Primary emphasis	Secondary emphasis	
Incumbent intelligence professionals	Obtained prior to employment	Secondary emphasis	Primary emphasis—obtained in agency-specific setting
Intelligence scholars		Primary emphasis	
Students seeking to improve critical thinking and analytic skills		Primary emphasis	
Any informed student	Primary emphasis	Supporting knowledge	

Source: Author

Students in intelligence studies programs need not despair. Informed academics who can derive useable information from historical intelligence scholarship and theories about the conduct of intelligence activities could serve the IC well. Additionally, intelligence studies programs teach valuable skills that are applicable to many careers, such as banking, law enforcement, and business risk analysis, which are often better paying than government service jobs. Finally, intelligence studies degree programs may be just what are needed to develop a more informed, less credulous public in relation to intelligence activities.

Endnotes

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