

Should Graduate Students Pursue Professional Skills?

Written by Daniel Clausen

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/03/should-ir-graduate-students-pursue-an-additional-professional-skill/>

DANIEL CLAUSEN, OCT 3 2013

Lately, I have been spending a lot of time on a website called Theory Talks. The website offers transcripts of conversations with prominent minds in the field of International Relations (IR). It is a great resource for IR graduate students, researchers, and other professionals who want to learn more about IR theory through casual conversation with some of the leading figures in the field. One of the most entertaining parts of reading entries on *Theory Talks* is seeing how different specialists respond to similar questions.

One question repeated in every interview is: "What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?"

Not surprisingly, each interviewee has their own take on what it takes to become an IR specialist. Typically, answers reflect the person's own background, or in some cases, qualities they believe they themselves lack as a researcher. Popular answers include: a comprehensive understanding of history; a tenacity in moving between theory and empirical data; language training to gain access to foreign cultures; and a willingness to explore scholarship outside of the field of IR. Certainly, this is not an exhaustive list of the types of answers found from interviews on the website, and I encourage everyone reading this post to discover for themselves the wealth of insights available on the site.

Out of all the different perspectives represented in *Theory Talks*, however, the one not represented is the perspective of the recent IR graduate struggling to get by. As I read through the articles, and especially paid attention to the question on professional development, one question kept recurring: How would the scholar have answered this question if he or she were hungry?

Perhaps the absence of direct discussions of money shouldn't be surprising. After all, these are established figures in the field. Yet, I still hoped that one or two scholars would discuss the topic of practical professional training as a key skill for IR professionals. Admittedly, I have not read all of the 57 interviews posted on the website, but thus far it seems that the subject of professional skills has yet to come up. The absence of any reference to professional skills is striking, given that in my own conversations with graduate students and those who have recently graduated often their most pressing concern is where they will find their next job.

Two things should be noted at this point: first, many of the theorists take for granted that creating International Relations scholarship is a professional skill; second, many of those interviewed argue that students need to develop good writing skills and statistical training. These two skills are certainly both fungible and marketable.

So, these theorists have addressed what IR professionals will need to thrive in academia and to create contributions to the field. However, assuming a soon-to-graduate PhD or Master's student wanted the flexibility to pursue employment outside of academia as a hedge against not finding a tenure-track position, postdoc, or even to avoid having to teach as an adjunct, what skills or experiences could IR professionals acquire during their programs that could help with both research and employment after graduation?

Certainly, this is not an exhaustive list, and I admit I'm not qualified to discuss all of the options presented here, but hopefully this will start some fruitful conversation on the issue:

GIS (*Geographic Information System*) *Certification*. Many universities offer a certification program for

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undergraduates and graduates. My own university offers a 15-credit graduate certificate program in GIS. Not only are there many decent paying jobs for GIS analysts and architects, but GIS skills also provide IR researchers with another tool for analysis and another way to gain access to actors such as NGOs and government bureaucracies who need GIS skills.

Grant Writing. Many graduate students already take graduate-level grant writing courses and may be employed while graduate students as grant writers for various research centers. Certainly, grant writing is important to gain access to research funds within our field. However, I would like to know if any IR professionals have had successful stints as grant writers after graduating.

TESOL (*Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*) *Certification.* Before starting my graduate program in IR, I had spent several years overseas as an English instructor. I had a fantastic experience and never shut the door on doing it again if a good opportunity presented itself. During my last year of graduate school, I did a 16-week course for TESOL certification. In comparison to some of the other skills described here, TESOL work can be labor intensive and low paying. In this way, it may not represent a good alternative to the other labor-intensive activity available to new graduates: adjunct teaching. However, it does have one benefit over other kinds of work: it will get you overseas (sometimes very quickly).

Accounting. My sister has an Associate's Degree in Accounting. She never seems to be in need of a job and has for the majority of her career made more money than me. Out of curiosity, I took the McGraw Hill 36-hour course in Accounting. I'm not sure if any other IR professionals have accounting degrees or experience and if this has helped them out, but I do see a number of openings for Budget Analysts in bureaucracies responsible for foreign affairs on usajobs.org. Would accounting be a useful skill to graft onto an IR degree, or an unnecessary detour?

There are a number of other practical skills that would seem to fall in the same category: project management; translation; statistics; computer programming. I'm sure there are some other, very obvious skills that are missing here.

What does one need to be a successful IR professional? Before one can create stellar contributions to the field, one must first eat. As Virginia Woolf wrote many years ago in *A Room of One's Own*, "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well." (A full copy of Virginia Woolf's classic book can be found [here](http://www.virginiawoolf.org))

Perhaps some of the suggestions above are too far off the beaten path to be attractive to IR professionals. Perhaps some will lead too far into professional careers that then make academic careers impossible. But perhaps some of these skills provide just the right amount of leverage to allow IR professionals to eat well, network well, and build resources for great contributions to the field.

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Daniel Clausen is a recent graduate of Florida International University's PhD program in *International Relations*. He graduated from the University of Miami with a Bachelor's Degree in *English and American Studies*. His research has been published in *Strategic Insights*, *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Culture and Conflict Review*, and the *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*. You can follow Daniel's work at: <http://fiu.academia.edu/DanielClausen>

About the author:

Daniel Clausen is a full-time special lecturer at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. His research has been published in *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, and *East Asia Forum*, among other publications. His teaching experience includes over seven years of experience as a TESOL instructor.

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He has also written several novels and short story collections. You can learn more about his work on his Amazon page [here](#) or on his Goodreads page [here](#).