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# Commentary: Attracting the Best and Brightest to Strategic Trade Careers

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The field of security studies increasingly attracts the attention of top-level students. As instructors at the University of Georgia's (UGA) Center for International Trade and Security (CITS), one of our challenges is reconciling common misconceptions about national security careers without diminishing student enthusiasm for their chosen career path. Involving students in CITS' training and outreach efforts is one tool that has proven effective in achieving this goal while drawing the attention of our top security-minded students to the field of strategic trade.

The students accepted into UGA's Richard B. Russell Security Leadership Program (SLP) and Master of International Policy Program (MIP) hail from a variety of personal backgrounds and fields of study representing the social and hard sciences. Nearly without exception, these applicants share two traits: They are devoted to the idea of a career in security policy and they are situated among the highest quartile of their academic cohort.

This level of interest from top-tier students is not surprising. The programs allow security-minded students the space and credit hours to seek out their own corner of a growing and increasingly complicated professional field. Over their history, alumni from the SLP and MIP entered nearly every security-related corner of the private and public sectors. Before any of them make it that far however, they must answer one question during their selection process: "Where do you see yourself working after graduation?"

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As instructors in the strategic trade field, we exist simultaneously as educators and as practitioners. Thus, our motivation to inform students about the importance of strategic trade management and its potential as a career path is twofold. As educators, we have a duty to introduce our undergraduate and graduate students to career options that will be relevant, challenging, and fulfilling in the long term. As practitioners in the management of strategic trade working with government and private sector entities, we have a duty to ensure that bright, security-minded students continue to find their way into this fascinating and vital field of work.

We pursue the completion of this duty along two fronts. First, we structure our curriculum in a way that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all facets of the modern national and international security paradigm. The inter-agency process and the “whole of government” approach are featured throughout our coursework. The work of prominent U.S. agencies such as the FBI and CIA is important and exciting, but, in the end, the work of the individuals serving in these more popular organizations support the same overarching objectives as the work of individuals serving in entities that are lesser known to the public. We take time in the classroom to highlight and demonstrate how less familiar offices and programs such as the Department of Commerce Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS), the Department of State Export Control and Related Border Security (EXBS) program, and the Department of Energy International Nonproliferation and Export Control Program (INECP) perform vital security functions.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, we create opportunities by which our undergraduate and graduate students can engage in the real work of strategic trade management and nonproliferation from the moment they begin our programs. This is achieved by encouraging participation in any one of the training and outreach events hosted at UGA’s Center for International Trade and Security (CITS). The goal is to let this practical experience be a shaping force in their educational process as future practitioners and policy makers, rather than asking the students to complete an arbitrary set of sanitized academic tasks before setting them loose into the professional wilderness. In short, our academic affiliation places us in the fortunate position of playing bridge builder instead of gatekeeper. The great value in this approach is that our student’s exploration of theoretical debates and mastery of the scholarship coincides, and subsequently is informed by, engagement with practitioners. By heavily and deliberately incorporating the experiential approach into our student programs, we have been able to foster in our students a greater awareness of and interest in the field of strategic trade management with results that have borne out well for both the students and the field as a whole.

Opportunities to participate and engage in training and outreach events arm our students with a broad and mature understanding of the security challenges facing the international community. Such events provide a forum for students to apply what they have learned in the classroom while testing their ideas for future policy research against the reality of practical engagement. Training and outreach events provide our students with exposure to the invaluable practical experience and insights of an international professional audience.

Students also benefit from the opportunity to interact with representatives from a variety of U.S. government agencies working at these events. Their conversations with U.S. and foreign government officials often illuminate practical issues that have gone unexplored in the classroom. These engagements and experiences sensitize students to the perspectives that drive the day-to-day efforts of the strategic trade management and nonproliferation communities.

The benefits to all sides in this arrangement are manifold. On one hand, the presence and engagement of the students allows CITS to better manage the needs of the participants, while, on the other hand, the participants benefit from a chance to interact with students who can share knowledge of the campus and the surrounding area.

The greatest beneficiaries in this arrangement, however, are undoubtedly the students, most of whom are having their first real experience attempting to cultivate a cordial working relationship with a representative from another country. Since the setting is fundamentally academic in nature, the stakes are lower than they might be in a traditional government-to-government engagement, permitting the students to build confidence in their own capacity for international outreach even as their fundamental competencies as strategic trade practitioners remain a work in progress. It is not uncommon for students with little to no previous appetite for preparing and executing this kind of engagement to come away from their experience having developed a taste for it, even if they had not previously considered international outreach and implementation work as a professional possibility.

The constructive results of this experience serve to emphasize the extent to which opportunities for practitioner engagement—especially across country borders—can serve to engender an interest in the field of cooperative strategic trade management where such interest may not have previously existed in the student's mind. Collaboration with international partners in pursuit of a common goal, even if not at the highest levels of diplomacy, can be an exceptionally gratifying and influential experience that leads students to reconsider their career paths.

Replicating such opportunities as the Security and Strategic Trade Management Academy, which sometimes hosts up to 80 participants, may not be practical for all institutions training students in strategic trade. Fortunately, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that small-scale engagements can be equally beneficial for all involved. Over the years, we have hosted numerous training events and cooperative workshops such as the Department of Energy's Asian Fellow's program with eight to twelve representatives from the strategic trade management sectors of foreign governments and private entities. In such cases, undergraduate and graduate students have been given similar opportunities to serve as guides, facilitators, and, in the case of more advanced graduate students, instructors for these training sessions. The observed effects on student enthusiasm for the field of strategic trade management before engagement and after engagement have been similar to those observed for the larger events. Involving students meaningfully in practitioner-oriented engagements tends to increase their interest in careers related to strategic trade-related outreach and capacity-building even in cases where the student has little to no prior exposure to the field or its fundamental subject matter. As an added benefit, the students enter the workplace able to more confidently engage with strategic trade professionals from outside the United States.

For a field that often enjoys only modest name recognition, students are surprised to learn of the ample career opportunities available to those well versed in strategic trade. Students grow to see that these opportunities exist across a host of U.S. Government agencies, international organizations, nonprofits, consultancies, and private industry. Each of these entities require employees knowledgeable of strategic trade practices to perform a range of functions from licensing and legal advising to internal compliance and law enforcement. For earnest students, a practical understanding of strategic trade can greatly expand the range of career options and

open doors to careers that were previously unimagined.

Underneath student aspirations for a security-oriented career conducting espionage or high-level diplomacy often resides a simple but genuine desire to be involved in meaningful work that contributes to the security of the nation and the international community. As educators and as practitioners, our challenge lies in effectively conveying the role of strategic trade management as a potent instrument of foreign policy and an essential component to international security. We have found that carefully structuring curriculum to highlight the interconnectedness of contemporary security challenges and supplementing that curriculum with experiential opportunities is an effective way to draw the attention of our best and brightest students to the abundance of promising careers in the field of strategic trade management.