

# Pondering Career Options for International Relations Majors

by **Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen**

Coming from a small town in Iowa, my international horizons were pretty limited when I first went off to college. I soon discovered that my favorite courses were world geography, international relations, foreign policy, comparative politics, and related topics. I was determined to engage with the world in some meaningful way, but what sorts of opportunities were open to International Relations majors? How could I best prepare myself? I was completely clueless. When my worried parents asked about post-graduation employment, I said (only half-jokingly) that if all else failed, I could probably become a mail man.

However, due to good fortune, sage advice, and lots of hard work, I became a Foreign Service Officer (FSO), spending 30 years as an American diplomat living, working, or traveling in 91 countries. In my opinion, being an FSO is the best job in the world.

Majoring in International Relations could lead to a rewarding career with the U.S. government in the fields of diplomacy, intelligence, security, law enforcement, international economics, management, policy planning, and many others. While the State Department is the premier U.S. foreign affairs agency (see [careers.state.gov](http://careers.state.gov)), many other government entities maintain a substantial presence abroad, including elements of the Departments of Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Treasury, Agriculture, and Transportation, as well as the Centers for Disease Control, the Peace Corps professional staff, and the Agency for International Development.

International organizations, such as the United Nations and its many specialized agencies (such as UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, UNEP, etc.), are another potential career path. Check out [intlorganizationjobs.state.gov](http://intlorganizationjobs.state.gov) for a comprehensive list of international organization job vacancies and internships. The State Department updates this list every two weeks.

Possible private-sector options include working for an international corporation, think tank, major consulting group, or an international non-governmental or non-profit organization.

How can you best position yourself to land a highly competitive professional position in the field of international relations?

I have some very specific recommendations, particularly about becoming an FSO, that I'll be sharing at a series of presentations around campus this semester. One immediate recommendation is for seniors and graduate students to sign up at [careers.state.gov](http://careers.state.gov) to take the State Department's Foreign Service Officer Test in October. That's the first step of the three-step FSO selection process. I'll provide tips and suggestions for passing this written exam at the presentations.

## **HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW:**

In general, recruiters in international relations fields look for academic firepower, sound judgment, leadership potential, language aptitude, cross-cultural interpersonal skills, and foreign experience. You also need to have a service orientation and an exploring gene to be happy and successful.

**Be an Excellent Student:** Study hard and take tough courses. Grades matter. When you're competing with 20 other applicants for a job or internship, many employers won't even consider a candidate with a 3.25 GPA or lower, or those who are academic dilettantes. Don't blow off class on Friday after a rowdy time downtown Thursday night.

**Be a Good Citizen:** If you're looking for a top-tier internship or job that requires a security clearance or background check (and most do), a problem with money, drugs, or alcohol can be a show-stopper. Any marijuana or other illegal drug use in the last 12 months is a disqualification for many sensitive federal government positions. Watch what you post on social media. Keep your credit ratings good and avoid repeated misdemeanor charges or fines indicating poor judgment. If wearing orange socks were to become illegal, don't wear orange socks.

**Seek Out Leadership Opportunities:** Work with student organizations, church or community service groups, Habitat for Humanity, or other organizations to demonstrate your service orientation and leadership potential. Debate, forensics, and Model UN can provide excellent leadership opportunities. If you're a high achiever, consider applying for Truman, Marshall, Rhodes, PMF, Pickering, or Pathways scholarships, internships, or fellowships.

**Show Language Aptitude:** Demonstrate that you're able and willing to learn another language. Taking a couple of introductory college French classes is good, but you'll learn to use French more effectively if you're studying, interning, or working in Dakar, Lille, or Quebec. Take a foreign language relevant to your region of interest. If you hope to work in Latin America but don't speak even a little Spanish or Portuguese, forget it.

**Develop Cross-Cultural Perspectives:** I spent the first 18 years of my life around people just like me. Foreign affairs employers want to know that you could happily and successfully live among and work with people of different backgrounds, cultures, values, and world views. You can help develop these skills by interacting with foreign students, multi-ethnic student groups, refugee assistance organizations, heritage language clubs or associations, and learning about different religions. After college, consider Teach for America or AmeriCorps/Vista to garner experience in places (perhaps) dissimilar to your home town.

**Get Foreign Experience:** Study abroad programs and international internships are excellent ways to gain foreign experience as a student. Every summer the State Department offers 1,000 student internships, half in Washington and half overseas. (Again, see [careers.state.gov](http://careers.state.gov) for details.) Many UN specialized agencies offer student internships. Besides internships and study abroad opportunities, some students consider going on a mission with a church group, participating in International Habitat for Humanity or another international NGO, or working overseas during a summer (even if not in a professional-track job). After college consider joining the military, becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer, or teaching English overseas to gain foreign experience.

**For Example:** The average entry age into the Foreign Service is about 29; a successful candidate might be an individual who has a strong undergraduate education (University of Iowa International Relations major with a GPA of 3.6), has garnered some international experience (Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal working on rural microfinance), earned an advanced degree (MBA from the University of Iowa's Tippie School), and then entered the Foreign Service in the Economics career track.