

10 things I tell undergraduates

I don't need to tell you what you already hear from many quarters: get a well-rounded education and enjoy yourself. That is good advice. But here are the ten extra things I tell all undergraduate advisees interested in international public service:

1. **Acquire skills that are hard to get outside school.** Your first temptation will be to fill your schedule with courses on fascinating subjects. Do this, but don't forget to also use university to tech up. For anyone interested in public policy or development, I suggest at two semesters of statistics and economics. Then pick a field of study in development (economics, politics, etc) and pick the hardest courses in each. Other technical skills may come in handy, depending on your interests: international law, political theory, tropical medicine, qualitative methods, finance & accounting, and so forth.
2. **Learn how to write well.** Take writing seriously. Consider a course in creative, non-fiction, journalism, or business writing. Read [books on writing](#). You won't regret it.
3. **Focus on the teacher, not the topic.** You will learn more from great teachers than great syllabi.
4. **When in doubt, choose the path that keeps the most doors open.** If you aren't sure of your interests, stick to mainstream majors, ones with plenty of job and grad school options at the end, and get your core stats and math training (multivariate calculus, linear algebra, and multivariate regression).
5. **Do the minimum language and management classes.** Languages are hugely valuable, but better learned in immersion, during your summers and holidays. Maybe take an intro course, but only that. Business and management skills are critical, but classrooms are poor places to get skills other than finance and accounting.
6. **Try careers on for size.** Don't wait until you finish law or medical school to discover you hate working in your specialty. Try out different careers in the summer—researcher, journalist, medical assistant, NGO worker, congressional aide, and so on.
7. **Go to strange places.** Use a summer or a school year to live abroad, ideally a place completely different from home, where you'll come to know local people (and not just the expat

community). A 10-week sojourn across Western Europe is a blast, but see if you can bunker down for longer in a less familiar locale. Here's when it makes sense to learn languages.

8. **Take some small classes with professors who can write recommendations.** If you're uninterested in grad school, skip to #9. But if a MA or PhD is an option, you will need at least three high quality recommendations. (See my recommendation letter advice [here](#).)
9. **If you don't have to write a thesis, think twice.** An independent research project can be the perfect capstone to your college years. Sadly, I often see theses that weren't worth the students' investment of time and energy. Some people's time would be better spent acquiring technical skills (see point 1). I used to advise students against a senior thesis if they had the choice. After getting [lots of disagreement on my blog](#), I've revised that view; a senior thesis can be a great investment if you are dedicated to a question of interest, want to learn how to research, want to strengthen a relationship with a professor, want practice for graduate school, or want to try out research and writing as a career option. (If you do plan to write a senior essay, [here](#) are my advising requirements.)
10. **Blow your mind.** At year's end you should look back at your thoughts and opinions twelve months before and find them quaint. If not, you probably didn't read or explore or work hard enough. (Come to think of it, this is not a bad rule for life.)

The logic underlying all the above advice: use your undergraduate degree to learn things that are hard to learn anywhere else. Statistics are not more important than languages. But the opportunity cost of skipping a statistics course is high because it's hard to find alternatives to university classes. Remember you only get 32 courses at university. The opportunity cost of a language program is low because there are a dozen other times and places you can get that skill.

For other views, see the excellent comments on [the original blog post of this advice](#). The New York *Times* recently had [advice from nine senior professors](#) in various disciplines.

Also see the list of advice posts on the left sidebar for thoughts on development, careers and graduate school.

Students at my university: Looking for an advisor? If you're interested in public policy, international development, African politics, or conflict, then I might be a good fit. Glance at my blog, research and projects (tabs above) and if you see common interests, then come by [my office hours](#) to chat. Please note, my skills and experience tend towards the quantitative side of

social science, and so while I can offer decent advice to budding ethnographers or human rights lawyers, you'd be wise to also talk to faculty in those fields as well.