Course content depends on the external client

Course Description

The Aim of the *International Affairs Capstone / Senior Seminar* is to allow students at the end of their 3-year BA studies to synthesize and draw on all their acquired knowledge and skills in order to apply them to a complex, real-life policy problem related to International Affairs or International and European Law. A core element of the learning process and format is the presence of an “external client” representing a major International Organization or Non-Governmental Organization, who sets the main policy-advice task for the students. The special nature of Vesalius College’s Capstone course lies in its close interaction with Brussels-based Policy-makers. In 2013 and 2014, the Capstone course was organized in cooperation with the European Union’s External Action Service (Maghreb Unit in 2013 and Syria Desk Officer in 2014), in 2015 with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and in 2016 with the United Nations (on UN Peacekeeping and EU-UN cooperation), in 2017 with NATO (Emerging Security Challenges Division, on EU-NATO cooperation).

The nature of the Capstone course as a Senior Seminar requires a high level of independent thought, academic maturity, intellectual curiosity and exchange of ideas. It also requires students to effectively work in think tank teams. A mature approach to teamwork, efficient division of labour, adherence to clear time lines and deadlines and the early resolution of potential conflicts between team members is essential.

The Capstone also serves as a free and informal forum for strengthening and re-honing major skills acquired during the 3-year undergraduate studies. As such, the Capstone is designed to contribute to preparing students for the job market and support their transition from academia to the policy world.

Learning objectives (an example from IA capstone in 2017)

*In terms of knowledge*

- To apply in an integrative and summative fashion their multidisciplinary IA knowledge (Politics, Economics, Law and History) of the main actors (in this case: member states,
NATO, EU and other partners) and the main processes in European and global affairs to a ‘real-life problem’ (in this case: EU-NATO cooperation)

- To apply demonstrable insights of the theoretical and historical dimensions of the academic literature on International and Regional Organizations (here: EU and NATO) and member states in peace and security to the interpretation of current processes and dynamics in international affairs
- To demonstrate a profound awareness of the societal and ethical dimensions of the topic at hand
- To understand the evolution, successes, failures and future potentials of EU-NATO relations in peace and security
- To analyze the position, policies and approaches of major EU and NATO member states on the two organizations’ cooperation
- To understand and appreciate the nature, processes, institutions and impact of the changing security environment
- To analyze and assess various policy options and security threats related to the EU, NATO and EU-NATO Relations
- To assess the “effectiveness” of the EU-NATO partnership and future avenues for improvement
- To apply common qualitative IA methods to the analysis of the Capstone client problem

In terms of Skills

- To communicate clearly, accurately and fluently in written and oral form
- To organize effective team-work (including division of tasks, a realistic and efficient timeline, division of work and clear deadlines and intermediate goals)
- To design appropriate presentation and analytical tools (with the help of websites, graphic tools, etc.)
- To improve presentation skills (both in terms of speaking and visual presentation skills)
- To perform effectively under situations of intense stress
- To address and resolve effectively intra-group tensions and conflicts
- To engage critically and confidently in various think-tank and academic settings in and beyond Brussels
- To conduct a confident and open dialogue with senior policy-makers and think tankers

In terms of Attitudes

- To demonstrate an open and academic attitude, characterized by accuracy, critical reflection (also about one’s own strengths, weaknesses and learning path) and academic curiosity as well as striving for life-long learning

Course Schedule

The Course is divided into three parts (Please keep in mind that the schedule depends on the external client). **During Part 1 (Weeks 1 – 3),** students will immerse themselves into main issues related to the tasks given by the client. Students will form two think tank groups and will begin their preparatory work. Students should map out key knowledge gaps and requirements and organize a time-table, division of labor and appropriate schedules for attending external events / interviews. Within each think tank, each student should focus on a subtopic, one of the key questions provided by the client. When more than one student is interested in researching
a subtopic within a think tank, they should consult with the instructor; we will discuss how to ensure that the division of labor is fair and effective. The first reading test, on Week 3, will be on the required readings and lectures up to that point.

**During Part 2 (Weeks 4 – 6)**, each student will prepare an individual research paper proposal (4-6 pages) on a key question. During this process, each student will also prepare a short document (300 to 450 words) that summarizes the most basic information in his or her subtopic for everyone else in this course. The second reading test will be partially based on these short documents. Sessions also include skill training (such as presentation and public speaking skills, including Video Analysis). Students are encouraged to visit think-tank events and interview experts on their respective subtopics.

Typically, there is a meeting with the client during Part 2.

**During Part 3 (Weeks 7 – 10)** “Acquiring Key Skills and Insights on the Topic” students will refine their work on their respective subtopics, deepen their understanding of the research topic and will begin formulating critical implementation advice for the client. The second reading test will take place on Week 7. While continuing their work on specialized subtopics, each think tank should hold meetings to plan how best to organize their final report. This period should also include visits to high-level think tank events and interviewing of officials and experts. Part 3 sessions will be complemented by skills and presentation training. Students should use their diaries to write a regular online blog. Individual research paper is typically due in this phase.

**During Part 4 (Weeks 11 – 13)** Finalizing the Final Draft, students will combine their individual analyses and will work in their teams in order to prepare the final draft of the final advice paper, briefing papers and presentation to the client. This part will consist of more intense presentation training (including video analysis), the writing of the online blog and the fine-tuning of data and core arguments.

The two groups will present their final products to the client on Week 13.

**Assignments**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mid-term Grade (Combined)</td>
<td>30 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Test 1</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Test 2</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Paper Proposal (and short overview of the student’s subtopic)</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributions to group activities (e.g., online blog, organizing a conference)</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual paper</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Client Products (Group Grade)</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<td><strong>Out of which</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Final Report (20%) &amp; Briefing Paper (5%)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation/ Q&amp;A</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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*Course Materials depend on the task given by the external client.*